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# *"How I Did It" ~*



H. H. VAN LOAN

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To my friend  
George Warren  
from the boy with  
"the blue"  
H. H. Van Loan.

San Francisco  
Dec 28-1922.





H. H. Van Loan



# "HOW I DID IT"

by  
H. H. VAN LOAN



WITH ILLUSTRATIONS  
FROM PHOTOGRAPHS

THE WHITTINGHAM PRESS  
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA



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**First Edition**

**Us**

**The aspiring author who is struggling as  
I have struggled, this book is dedicated.**



## AN APPRECIATION

*I have watched Mr. Van Loan's rise to the higher stellar spaces of achievement in screen writing from the time he forsook his following as one of New York's leading journalists to become Director of Publicity for the Universal Film Company. He began his career as a photoplaywright with very little of the knowledge he now imparts to you.*

*This book is not offered as a course of instruction, but simply as a plain, straightforward review of Mr. Van Loan's ideas and methods of creating and assembling his stories.*

*The publication of this work has been the result of the following circumstances: About two years ago Mr. Van Loan was requested to prepare a series of articles on photoplay writing for the Los Angeles Evening Express, and later for the San Francisco Bulletin, the Oakland (Cal.) Tribune, the Phoenix (Ariz.) Republican, the San Diego Tribune and the Hudson (N. Y.) Morning Republican.*

*When I saw the hundreds of letters that poured in on Mr. Van Loan, commending him for the wonderful aid he had given to aspiring screen authors, I made an arrangement with him to publish this volume.*

*Having been identified with the making of motion pictures for several years, I can heartily and honestly recommend this work as the most instructive and helpful treatise of its kind I have ever seen.*

LINDSAY MCKENNA.



**Among H. H. Van Loan's Successes Are:**

<i>Vive La France</i> . . . . .	<i>Dorothy Dalton</i>
* <i>The New Moon</i> . . . . .	<i>Norma Talmadge</i>
<i>The Virgin of Stamboul</i> . . .	<i>Priscilla Dean</i>
<i>Three Gold Coins</i> . . . . .	<i>Tom Mix</i>
<i>The Great Redeemer</i> . . . . .	<i>House Peters</i>
<i>The Wonderful Chance</i> . .	<i>Eugene O'Brien</i>
<i>The Speed Maniac</i> . . . . .	<i>Tom Mix</i>
<i>Fightin' Mad</i> . . . . .	<i>William Desmond</i>
<i>Bring Him In</i> . . . . .	<i>Earle Williams</i>
<i>The Third Eye</i> . .	<i>Warner Oland-Eileen Percy</i>
<i>The Highest Trump</i> . . . .	<i>Earle Williams</i>
<i>The Breaking Point</i> . . .	<i>Bessie Barriscale</i>
* <i>A Rogue's Romance</i> . . . .	<i>Earle Williams</i>
<i>Winning With Wits</i> . . .	<i>Barbara Bedford</i>
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<i>The Sage Brush Trail</i> . . . . .	<i>Roy Stewart</i>
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**\*Reissued 1922.**



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## CHAPTER I

### THE AUTHOR'S ERA

There have been three eras in the history of moving pictures. The first was the individual or company era, during which these two factors were the most important in the making of productions. After the manufacturer's era the industry entered its second stage and the star proceeded to focus the admiration of the public. Everything and everybody, everywhere, bowed in deep respect to the principal actors in photoplays. It was during this period that the favorite actors had the satisfaction of seeing their names in a blaze of incandescents in front of theatres. Their names became household words. There is no doubt about the influence of the screen. It is universal in its appeal because all can see and understand its message. In this it far exceeds the limitations of the legitimate stage. The result has been that Charles Chaplin, Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks are as

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well known in Stamboul as they are right here in America. Not one star of the legitimate stage can boast of such far-reaching popularity.

The star was not tardy in realizing he was a box-office attraction. The producer soon became acquainted with this fact. The result was that during this era fabulous salaries were paid to the stellar lights in the moving picture industry. It seemed for a time as though a wave of frenzied finance was sweeping the industry. Producers seemed to lose their sense of values. In mad delirium they battled with each other for the services of a particular star. This was music to the ears of the stars and they sat back and smiled as they dictated their terms to the producer. The stars stated their salaries, and it often meant hundreds or thousands a week to their employers. The producer met their terms, apparently without much objection.

That was a wonderful era, and it will occupy an important chapter in amusement and theatrical history. It was the first time in the annals of his profession that the actor had

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ever been paid a respectable salary. But the actor's era was comparatively short-lived. It was doomed to fail, partially because of the bombastic arrogance which accompanied the rise of a group who had suddenly been elevated into popularity. Many of them had not the ability to succeed on the speaking stage because of poor diction, lack of grace and weak voices. The silent drama offered new possibilities for them and they were not slow in grasping the opportunity. Their success was accompanied by unreasonable demands made of the producer. Some of those who made these demands were idols of the public, with immense drawing power as box-office attractions, and the producer could either meet their terms or lose fortunes. The producer was absolutely in their power.

But the actor had overlooked one very important truth. As time progressed it became more and more apparent that the stars were not big enough to hold the interest of the audience without proper vehicles and good material in the way of stories. Such favorites as Fairbanks and Pickford found their popu-

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larity in the balance, because of the lack of good photoplays. "The Mark of Zorro" brought Fairbanks back with a bang, and "The Three Musketeers" proved beyond all reasonable doubt that he had regained his position as one of the foremost actors of the screen. Mary Pickford proved by her excellent work in "Stella Maris" that she is a great actress, and thus endeared herself to her millions of admirers. "Mary Pickford," the ideal, will always be loved by the entire world, and Mary Pickford, the actress, will find it difficult to live up to that ideal. "The Kid" re-established Charles Chaplin in the hearts of millions and it is doubtful if anyone will ever be able to crowd him out. His work is distinctive and different and his fame is permanent.

After the actor's era, came the era wherein the director was given an opportunity to show his ability. His era is now drawing to its close, and we must admit that his inning has not been as important or as successful as the one which preceded it.



The Name of the Author Was Featured, During the Run of "Fightin' Mad" at Loew's State Theatre in Los Angeles





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During the actor's era many new names were introduced to the screen—names that will shine illustriously for years to come. When the careers of some of these artists are ended it will be difficult to fill their places or forget the sweetness and charm they have added to the screen. But with very few exceptions, the director's era has not been a great success and not more than half a dozen names will remain pre-eminent in the years to come. One reason for this is that too many have unconsciously sacrificed great careers because they were not content to devote all their efforts to directing. They wanted to become authors as well. No man can do two things and do them well. A director should not attempt to write photoplays, and an author should not seek to direct, other than his own stories. The director has a right to suggest, and the author is entitled to supervise and assist, but when either of them seeks to do the work of the other the result is far from satisfactory.

Too many times the director has felt that he knew more about the story than the author.

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He consistently and persistently ignored the author and permitted his egotism and vanity to distort, deface, massacre and mutilate perfectly good plots. There is no doubt that the director has done good work, but he could have done better if he had worked more harmoniously with the creator of the story. However, it is with pleasure that we record the improvement of the director along this line, and of late he has been quite eager and anxious to consult the author and get his ideas in connection with the preparation of the script as regards sets, spectacles and situations.

However, we must not attempt to minimize the importance of the director. He is the most important figure in the making of a moving picture, and the ultimate outcome of a production rests solely on his ability. He has it within his power to make something worthy out of something weak. Under his guidance, poor material can be made into something big and impressive. On the other hand, he can take something rich and beautiful and make of it an ugly thing. The success or failure of a production depends upon

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the director. The author is the architect. He draws the plans. The director is the builder. He can erect a fine structure which will remain firm and steadfast, withstanding the ravages of time, or he can build an unsightly edifice, which will crumble and fall immediately upon completion.

If the director is given a fool-proof story he cannot go wrong. He has never failed to give the public something worth-while, when given such a story, and he never will fall down if provided with a script which has a smooth-running plot, with good suspense, plenty of action, charming romance and human appeal. But if he is given a story which has illogical situations, glaring inconsistencies and unnatural sequences, he will try and make something presentable out of it. If he succeeds, after considerable juggling and tilting, to make something good out of something bad, he deserves all the credit the public is willing to give him.

The era which will be the last and the most important of them all is just arriving. It is going to be the era of the author: the

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age when he will come into his own. In the future the story is going to be the thing. Everything else will be of lesser importance. It should have been so from the very beginning, and would have been, had the producer been willing to admit the importance of the story. But he found to his regret, many times, that the biggest star and the best director were not able to make great pictures from poor material. He also discovered it is possible for a good story to "make" a star or director. In other words, the producer has learned that no man can do good work with a poor kit of tools.

In the past, the producer has not smiled kindly on the original writer, or photodramatist. For several years he refused to recognize the importance of the original story, or photoplay, and was content to purchase screen rights to books, novels, plays and short stories. Now and then he dipped into the classics. In those days the screen writer was poorly equipped and poorly paid. He received no recognition either from the producer or public. He was looked upon as the



**To Olga Printzlau the Author of This Work Is Greatly Indebted for  
Whatever Success He Has Attained as a Photodramatist**



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last resort for a story. He belonged to no profession and his work was not accepted as an important part of the success of a picture. This was because the picture itself was not accepted as a form of entertainment that would ever become popular with the masses. It appealed to a limited number of people in those days. When the producer was in a pinch, the screen writer would dash off a story after dinner and deliver it the next morning, and by noon the picture would be half finished. Sometimes the producer and writer would compose a story as they sat beside the camera.

But as the screen progressed and gradually interested the more seriously minded, the screen writer advanced with it, until the producer finally realized the profession of screen writing was becoming a very valuable asset to the production of moving pictures.

However, the producer did a lot of experimenting before he was willing to admit that screen writing was an art in itself. There came a period when producers stampeded for the screen rights to popular books, plays and



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short stories, and in their delirious attempt to outdo their competitors the producers paid enormous prices for permission to reproduce these works on the screen. Soon they discovered they had made a mistake, and millions of dollars were spent before they learned that screen writing is a separate profession and requires a special kind of work.

Novelists and playwrights rushed to gather in some of the big money. Some of them made great efforts to become photoplaywrights. They soon discovered that photoplaywriting is different from all other forms of literary work. They were weighed in the balance and found wanting. They had scoffed and sneered at the screen in its youth and had refused to take it seriously, with the result that the screen, meantime, had progressed and proved that instead of being a temporary fad, it had come to stay.

Meantime, the screen writer had plugged along conservatively and consistently. He spent more time in writing his stories, and the price of his creations consistently rose because they represented more care, time and

thought. He compelled the producer to recognize his importance, and before long the producer admitted that the success or failure of a production was almost entirely due to the work of the screen writer. He realized more and more that the continuity, written by the screen writer, was capable of reaping big financial harvests or absolutely spoil any chances the story might have had of success. And eventually a new profession—the profession of photodramatist—came to be recognized by producer, press and public.

A photodramatist is not necessarily a continuity writer, or scenario writer. A photodramatist is a writer who writes his stories in dramatic pictures. Many of them were schooled and received their training as scenario writers; many of them were continuity writers. A number of them now confine their talents to writing detailed synopses of their plots and leave the mechanical work of the script to the continuity writers.

The photodramatist, or screen author of today, works in the same fashion that novelists and dramatists do. He isolates himself and

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surrounds himself with the greatest privacy while he is working on a script. He doesn't dash out a story overnight. On the other hand, he spends days and weeks, even months, concentrating on his subject, in order that he may put into his story the best of his creative ability. He has found that it pays, and whereas he at one time received twenty-five dollars for a story, today he is paid from one thousand to ten thousand dollars for his script. In the future he will probably receive even more. His work is entirely different from that of the dramatist, novelist and short story writer. The screen brought opportunity to writers who had been handicapped in the past because there was no market for their product. There were many writers capable of creating big dramatic plots and yet were unable to sell them because they had no literary style. If they happened to have style, it was not attractive enough to command the attention of magazine editors or book publishers. They might have been expert in handling narrative or descriptive matter, but inefficient when it came to the treat-

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ment of dialogue. Or perhaps they did not know how to build up action. On the other hand, they might have been able to write good dialogue, but lacked descriptive and narrative ability. Therefore, until recently, there was absolutely no market for the material they turned out. Again, lack of sufficient education prevented the work of many writers from being accepted by literary editors. They might have had wonderful plots, filled with big action, but were incapable of describing that action in a smooth and attractive style.

But the moving picture gave these writers an opportunity of disposing of their work. This is due to the fact that the screen picturizes the plot, and depends very little on the dialogue or other elements so necessary to good fiction writing.

The road of the photodramatist has not been a pleasant one. It hasn't been paved. It was a long, hard trail, and the journey was filled with struggles and discouragements. It was choked with sacrifices and sufferings. But those who have arrived at the brow of the hill will admit to the aspirant that it was

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with the suffering and sacrificing that they progressed, and that it was the gaining that gave them pleasure, perhaps even more than the attainment.

The cry of the producer today is: "Give me an original story! . . . I'm sick of books and plays!"

A few months ago a screen author submitted a story to a well-known producer. The producer read it and accepted it. Afterwards he stated that at the same time he purchased this story he refused a script written by a well-known playwright. According to the producer, the playwright had refused to take the screen seriously and had written a very poor story, which revealed lack of care and study in its preparation. He felt convinced that he would be able to sell the story on the strength of his reputation. But he must have been greatly surprised when the story was returned to him. Producers are not buying reputations any more. They've been stung too often. The playwright's story had been told in three typewritten pages, while the story written by the screen author was on fifty

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pages, and to quote the producer, "was written by one who knew his screen."

These things are told the reader to show that the screen is the infant amusement and emphasize its importance; to familiarize the unacquainted with the revolutionizing steps already taken. Its progress has been slow and conservative, perhaps a little sensational at times, but we can overlook its recklessness, for, like all youths, it was trying hard to find itself. Its future is going to be glorious. There will be new faces. New stars will come and go, but they will never twinkle as they did when the industry was in swaddling clothes.

Henceforth, the story will be the thing, and the writer who takes the screen seriously, and spends plenty of care and thought in the preparation of his work, will deliver contributions which will gain for him not only fame in this generation, but they will be preserved in archives and later re-issued that posterity may have a knowledge of the great photodramatists of the present age.

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So, I say to the aspiring screen author, novelist and playwright, it is worth the effort. The screen will take you just as seriously as you take it.

For the purpose of aiding those who desire to do something really worth-while for the silent drama, I have written my experiences in the writing and selling of photodramas. I intended that it should be more of an inspirational guide than a text-book, and if it proves to be of real help to those who have become discouraged, and is the means of their making further attempt in a profession which is fascinating to say the least, then I shall feel that it has accomplished a little and was not written in vain.







## CHAPTER II

### MOSTLY ABOUT IDEAS

There are supposed to be by actual count—although I've been too busy to verify it—about one hundred million of us in the United States. And with the exception of a negro switchman, stationed three miles west of the Turnpike, on the outskirts of Eureka, Georgia, who has been deaf, dumb and blind since his birth, all of us have at times believed we were logically entitled to become the Shakespeare of the screen.

That's a most excellent ambition. But somewhere between the first and second story, something snatched the "am" out of that word. The result has been that the screen has suffered. Something always has to suffer. However, this particular sort of suffering cannot be due to the fact that there is a dearth of ideas in America, or that creative art is on the decline. The undiscovered talent is the greatest talent of all. If there is one na-

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tion that has been blessed with ideas it is the United States. No matter where you go, or which way you turn, you can behold great evidences of ideas that were born, grew up and still flourish with magnificent success under our local trademark. The way in which it was discovered was most original; the manner in which it gained its independence was decidedly different, and the way it has gone about everything since its birth has attracted the attention and admiration of the entire world.

Despite this, many people often sigh, after leaving a motion picture theatre, and as they plod homeward they are of the opinion that the art of the screen is on the decline with the brakes burned out. They start to reflect over the rise of steel, oil and industrials, and fail to understand why every picture released at the local theatre does not show an upward trend.

A picture is similar to an egg, in that it is either good or bad. We don't find the grocer throwing away the bad eggs. Then why should we expect the producer to throw a bad

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picture away? It represents an outlay, just as the egg does. They both slip across a bad one when we're looking; only we can't see the inside of the egg!

Now then, we can't expect the one hundred million of us to devote our time to making hens lay better eggs or the producers to make better pictures. Few of us are familiar enough with either, beyond being able to distinguish between the good and the bad; one with the aid of the nose and the other with the aid of the eyes. But those of us who have ideas which would make good story material, should put them on paper, and thus be instrumental in the making of better pictures. Some people seem to think that they haven't any ideas. But D. W. Griffith has truthfully said that there is a story in every human being; but the trouble is to get it out. Perhaps we are not of an observing mind. Some people never get ideas because they are so completely surrounded with them.

For example: We happen to be passing along a busy thoroughfare during the rush hour. Suddenly we see a man stumble over

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an object on the sidewalk. His contortions executed during his efforts to keep himself from falling make him resemble a temperamental orchestra leader. It excites laughter. Immediately we decide that here is a great idea for a comedy photoplay, and that such a scene would make an immense hit on the screen.

But the photodramatist will point out that it isn't an idea. It is merely a situation; that it isn't original and is insufficient on which to base a comedy. It is slap-stick. Slap-stick comedy is practically founded on the idea that laughter is usually derived from injury.

Originality is anything which is a departure from the ideal. It is anything out of the ordinary. It is something different. We argue that it is not quite the usual thing for our residents to go along the street stumbling, and making frantic efforts to keep from falling, and if they did, then we wouldn't be interested and we wouldn't laugh. But that is where we are wrong. People have stubbed their toes ever since they were presented with



Virginia Brown Faire Played the Leading Feminine Roles in "Fightin' Mad" and "Storm Swept"



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them, because stupid humanity refuses to look where it treads.

The alert mind—the mind that has been trained to be on the lookout for the extraordinary—will point out that, had that same man discovered the cause of his embarrassment was a lump of gold, which upon investigation proved to be a part of the Mother Lode which had been there for thousands of years, his error would have been quite original. That idea would be sufficient on which to base a good dramatic story.

All of us, each day, are surrounded with most unusual incidents, which, if we would put into stories, would greatly enhance the amusement value of the greatest entertainment in the world today. When the author, playwright or photodramatist completes his story, play or photoplay, he admits that his basic idea was inspired by some incident that he witnessed, or that was brought to his attention, and actually happened in real life. When we start to write fiction we get our material from facts.



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I am going to try and give the reader some real tips on screen writing. In the first place you must have an idea. Don't mislead yourself into believing that you have something new. There are only thirty-six plots known to civilization, and every one of them has been used thousands of times by authors, novelists, playwrights and photodramatists. You may be able to distort, juggle and twist those plots in various ways—perhaps serve them a little differently—but do not think you have something entirely new. There is absolutely nothing new this season.

When you are stricken with an idea, and you are convinced that this particular idea can be surrounded with a good story, sit down and write it. Type it. If you can't do that, have it typewritten. Producers are too busy to read stories that are written in long-hand.

Get into your story immediately. Don't paint a glorious background with a lot of words which don't mean anything. Meaningless words only interrupt the action. But on the other hand, don't leave too much to the imagination of the reader. Don't glide over a

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situation and trust to the producer to work it out. Use your inventive genius and describe in detail the way you think the entire scene should be worked out and the way it should be acted. If you were enthusiastic over your new home, and were writing a relative a long distance from you, you would undoubtedly describe every feature of it in minutest detail. You must be enthusiastic over your story. If you're not, then don't write it. If you are, then you will describe it at great length, just as you would your new home.

Put plenty of action into your story. Keep your characters moving all the time. Be careful. Do not make them do a lot of things which are not necessary—not important in the working out of your plot. You must remember that the screen differs from the stage and the story in that movement is the dominating element. The greatest second act ever written for the stage can be reduced to a couple of scenes and one or two subtitles on the screen. That is because the photodramatist realizes he must keep his actors moving on the screen, and unless he does so, his audience

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will walk out before the picture is entirely un-reeled.

A dramatist uses clever dialogue to put over the big punches in his play, but the screen author has to supplement that dialogue with real big action. Action is the most important ingredient in the photoplay. There must be lots of it, and it must be logical and necessary to the development of the plot. It mustn't be put into the script just to furnish movement for the actors. It must have a decided bearing on the outcome.

In fact, the point to remember in writing for the screen is: First, establish a reason for the story, then introduce your characters, and after you have done that, make a dash for your climax. That's all there is to it. Establish a premise and then rush for the final scene. Don't waste any time while en route. Be sure that it contains action, action, and then some more action. Mix a few thrills with it. Flavor it with the sweet essence of romance and throw in a lot of suspense. Put some big human interest into it. Bring a tear to the eyes of your audience. Then, the



James Young, who Directed "The Highest Trump" and "A Rogue's Romance"



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next instant, chase away the tear with a smile. If you do that, then you've got a story.

After you have written it, sit down and read it over carefully. Read it with a critical eye. Forget that it is your story; imagine it was written by someone else. If it doesn't hold your interest then there is something wrong with it. If there is something wrong with it then find out what it is. Don't let it go until you have found out. Remember there is plenty of time. The moving picture industry is here to stay and the producers are always looking for good stories, so there is no need for you to rush your work. As you read it over, try and put yourself in the position of the man who is going to read it—the man you hope will buy it. Ask yourself the same questions you believe he will ask after he reads it.

Do not annoy the producer by sending a long letter to him describing the merits of your story. He is perfectly capable of deciding whether the story is worthy of production and he will be quick to discover whatever good qualities it might possess. And it is quite unnecessary to tell him the story is dif-

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ferent; that it has never been done before. Everything in the story line has been done before. There is nothing original in fiction.

Anything which is different is original. Therefore, I desire to rise up and decry that word "original" in connection with its use with screen stories. It is a grossly misused term as applied to the writing of stories, whether they be for the screen, magazine or stage. Very few things that are being done in the world today are original. Most everything has been done before. A writer who submits his story to a producer with the statement that it is original, is brave indeed. I would not care to state that "Vive la France," "The New Moon," "The Virgin of Stamboul" or "The Great Redeemer" were original stories. They were based on fact, and anything inspired by actuality cannot be original. Almost every story I have written has been an elaboration of something which happened in real life. Therefore, I consider none of them original. I think we should ban that word "original" from our moving picture par-

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lance, and henceforth use the more appropriate word, "photoplay."

I am often asked where I get my ideas for my stories. I get them from real life. Let me illustrate.

I awoke one morning after a terrible nightmare, with perspiration on my brow. In my sleep, I had killed a man, and it was so realistic that I recalled all the horrible details for a day or two afterward. But before I go on, let me state here that I am one of those who believe that writers are often given messages to present to the world. If we train our powers of perception we will not often permit these messages to pass unnoticed. I also believe that ideas travel in circles, and if we do not accept the inspiration when it comes and immediately seek to make use of it, we will probably find that someone more ambitious than ourselves will utilize it, much to our regret later.

The atrocious crime which my subconscious self had committed seemed to suggest a story. So I began pondering over this dream to see what I could get out of it. I would



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write a story wherein the hero would dream that he had killed a man who was a total stranger to him. Then, the next morning, the hero would read in the newspaper that a man had been murdered in exactly the same manner the night before. The police would be baffled. The hero would go to the police and confess that he was the guilty man.

No, that wouldn't do. That would be stretching fiction too far. So I continued building and tearing down, until finally a few days later, I had constructed the following story:

An eminent surgeon returned home after several weeks sojourn a few hundred miles away. He retired. He dreamed that he had burglars about, he put on his dressing-gown killed his worst enemy, and awakened in the most troubled frame of mind. A dog barking in another part of the house aroused him from his nightmare, and believing there were and went downstairs. He took a revolver from the drawer of a table in the hall and started searching the rooms. As he entered the library he stumbled and the gun was dis-

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charged. He turned on the light and found the body of the man he dreamt he had killed, lying on the floor. Did he kill him? If so, did he kill him in his sleep or did he kill him as he entered the library? That was the question I asked my audience by having the hero ask the same question of himself. In order to keep the audience in suspense I never answered the question until the last scene in the picture. Of course, he didn't kill the man.

So those who saw "Bring Him In," saw a story that was inspired by a dream or nightmare I had experienced months before.

I think this bears out my statement that fact is stranger than fiction. The creative genius of the most inventive mind could not evolve a plot more dramatic than is revealed in the above story. I am very fond of this story because of the fact that I received it from such a peculiar source. There's no reason why those who write should throw away any valuable time, and if we must sleep, then we should make our dreams work for us.

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To those who aspire to become photodramatists, I want to impress the truth that stories are like oxygen—they are around us everywhere. But we must have the creative ability to recognize them. We must train our minds to differentiate between that which is ordinary and that which is commonplace. Again I will illustrate:

One of the reporters on a New York daily brought in a story one day about an explosion on a building in course of construction on the West Side of the city. The explosion blew two Italian laborers from a high scaffolding, killing both of them. There was the story, as he saw it.

But upon questioning the reporter, the city editor learned that a baby asleep in a go-cart, not more than fifty feet from the scene of the accident, was not only uninjured, but remained undisturbed and slept through all the excitement.

There, to the editor's mind, was the story—the more dramatic aspect of the incident—and so he told the reporter to write half a column about that baby, and make only casual men-

tion of the two laborers. Why did the editor devote so much space to the baby who was not killed, and only a paragraph to the two men who were blown to atoms? Because the trained mind of the editor knew that the death of two Italian laborers was not worth anything as a news story. Such stories are common. They are not unusual and happen most every day in any big city where construction is going on all the time. But the fact that a defenseless baby was within fifty feet of the explosion and remained asleep throughout all the excitement was indeed remarkable. It was unusual, out of the ordinary. It was "different," and therefore a good story.

Hardly a day passes that the newspapers do not print material which would furnish the basis of good fiction stories. When I say this I do not mean to convey the thought that such stories could be taken as printed. I mean that they have the foundation for fiction material, and with the added elements of romance, action, suspense and intrigue, offer excellent possibilities for photoplays.

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Soon after the Reds gained control of the Russian government, the newspapers printed a glaring announcement that the Bolsheviks had abolished the law of marriage. The Soviet at Saratof decreed that henceforth it would be unlawful for a man to solely possess his wife, but that she would belong to the public and would become public property. The excuse given for this remarkable decree was that it would insure the propagation of a declining race.

Such a story was a most radical departure from the ordinary. It had never been equaled in history. It was a tremendous piece of news, and the most barbarous document ever conceived by the most brutal forces of man. If such a decree was permitted to run unchecked it threatened the decency of the forthcoming generation.

After considerable effort, I succeeded in obtaining a genuine copy of the original decree. It was horrifying. After reading its sixteen articles I wondered if I couldn't, in at least a small way, prevent that decree from becoming active in the other provinces of Rus-



**Priscilla Dean and H. H. Van Loan Reading What the Critics Had to Say About "The Virgin of Stamboul"**



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sia. At least, I could reveal to America and the rest of the civilized world the illiterate souls of a degenerate group of leaders.

So I wrote a story called "The New Moon," and sold it to Norma Talmadge. The picture created a sensation in certain sections of the country where anarchy had a strong-hold, and efforts were made to suppress it in Milwaukee and Houston.

The anarchists declared the story was a gross untruth, but fortunately the editors of the newspapers in many cities were familiar with the real document and they came to the rescue and pointed out that I had moderated instead of exaggerated the real truth. In their opinion, the picture did more good than a dozen sermons, because it disclosed a great error which had crept into the minds of these delirious leaders.

Some of the critics declared the decree was abolished before it was put into execution, but I will vouch for the statement that it was enforced in the Province of Saratof for three months, and I have since read some of the experiences of women who were its victims.



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Could the ingenious mind of a writer create a plot of greater dramatic value than this? It was most extraordinary—the fact that a group of men attempted to thrust society back into a barbarous age and intended to destroy all moral laws and the sanctity of the home, was sufficient to arouse the hatred of the entire civilized world. Such a move was sufficient to provide a tremendous theme for a story. You might question the effect of such a picture. The purpose was to open the eyes of such an intelligent and progressive country as America on the events that were taking place in a darkened land, and the results when the civilization of a country returns to barbarism and Christianity goes mad. In this picture no attempt was made to teach a lesson. The actual facts were conveyed to the audience through the medium of a dramatic plot based on a truth.

It's the big themes of the day that provide the most interesting bases for good stories. Not alone do they provide good entertainment for those of the present generation, but they can be laid away in the archives and displayed

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to posterity as a record of events which transpired in this day and age.

While the World War was in progress, I read a front-page story in a newspaper wherein it was stated there were traitors in some of our aeroplane factories. They were supposed to be paid agents of the enemy and it was their duty to see that many of our machines were defective when they left the factory. Before they were discovered, according to the story, many of our aviators were killed. Most of these accidents occurred during the trial flights. Another evil which a writer could easily stamp indelibly on the minds of the American people and thus put the government on its guard.

Using this as my theme, I wrote a story called "The Highest Trump," which was purchased by the Vitagraph Company and in which Earle Williams played the leading role.

I went no further than the facts to get my story, and then wove a romance through it so that it would have an amusing appeal to the audience. Some of the government officials became so interested in the disclosures made

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in the story that an entire aviation field, including its aviators, took part in the production. Without one exception, all the fliers admitted the story was an actual fact and expressed pleasure that the public was to be made familiar with another attempt of the enemy to fight unfairly.

These experiences are recorded to show the writer that it is within his power to be of inestimable value to the public. The one great weapon for fighting great evils is publicity. And there is no greater power when it comes to this than the screen.

If more people would devote more time to a closer observation of the incidents which are unusual and which play such an important part in our daily lives, the producers would have enough stories to last them indefinitely. The reason they haven't this great supply at present is because the majority of us ignore the little things in life which are very often unusual, and a departure from the ordinary, and concentrate on those things which are commonplace. Learn to differentiate between the ordinary and the unusual. That's the se-

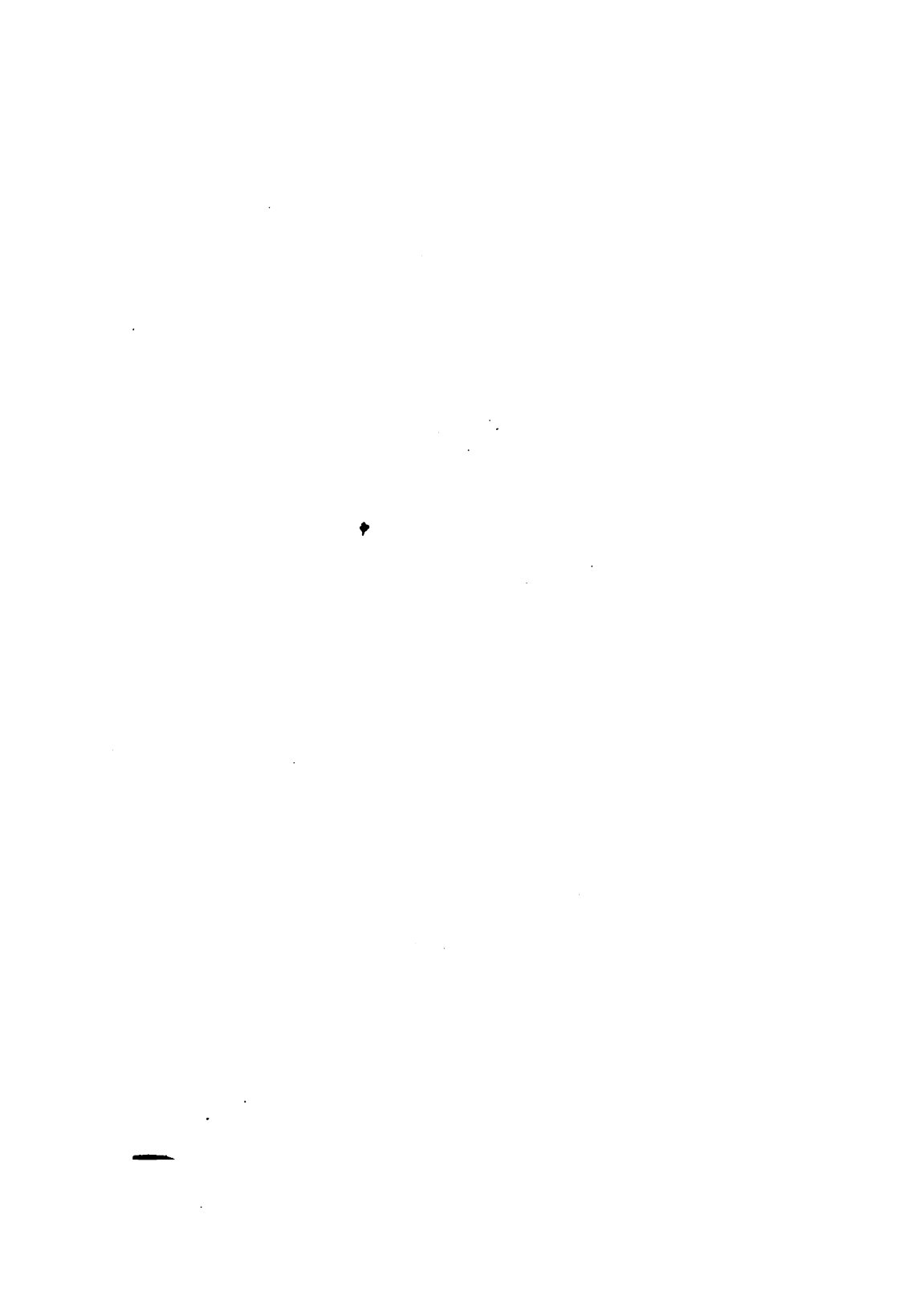
*Laurel*



enty of  
suspense,

to

William Hays, Virginia Brown Faire, Director Robert Thornby and  
Lena. Swept during the filming of "Storm Swept"



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cret of not only successful photoplaywriting but all other forms of literary work. The best stories are never written, because we pass them by. We should devote more of our time to putting ourselves on the alert for those little things which form such an infinitesimal part of our daily lives, and yet which would have such tremendous appeal if seen on the screen. "The Miracle Man" was a very simple story; a very great story. It was simple in that it showed what happens when the evil forces meet the better and nobler qualities which are in all of us. It was a great story because of the fine dramatic way in which it was told. It delivered a message without a preachment. People do not go to the theatre to look at sermons. They go to be amused and to relax. But if we can give them something which may help them to become a little better, without subtracting from the dramatic interest and sublime suspense which we all love, then we are doing a real service to humanity.

If you can write a story which has plenty of action, red-blooded drama, thrilling suspense,

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charming romance and startling climaxes, you have done something. If you can consistently bring about the reform of an evil character, you deserve the praise of your audience. If you can go a step farther, and work out the reformation of an evil character with the aid of the Supreme Being, you have done something worthy of great tribute.

The reason? The majority of us want to become better men and women. We are all curious, and curiosity is the means we use to gain instruction. A bad man isn't bad because he wants to be bad. He's bad because he doesn't have a desire to be good. Plant in him a desire to improve, and show him the way, and he will grasp it.

One night, a few years ago, before prohibition made the country wet, a prospector, who had been searching for gold up around Kingman, Ariz., arrived in San Bernardino, just across the California boundary, with considerable "dust" in his belt. He wandered into a saloon where he proceeded to "oil up," and before long everybody in the place was enjoying his hospitality. The scene gradually be-

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came diffused to the eyes of all, except one. That one was a tough-looking greaser, who had a rather bad reputation in that vicinity and had served a portion of his life behind bars of a much different nature.

This greaser stood alone at one end of the room and kept his gaze fixed on the prospector and the gold which he flourished from his belt. The bartender was conscious of the Mexican's interest, and he noted that when the prospector staggered out the greaser soon followed.

The next morning the body of the prospector was found in an alleyway near the saloon. He had been foully murdered.

The bartender's suspicions were aroused and he recalled the interest manifested by the Mexican the night before. The Mexican was arrested and convicted on circumstantial evidence.

While the Mexican was awaiting trial he spent most of his time drawing pictures on the wall of his cell in the San Bernardino jail. The jailer paused before the door of his cell one day and was amazed as he discovered a



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life-sized drawing of Christ on the cross. The picture was on the rear panel of the man's cell and was a faithful reproduction of the crucifixion. It was a beautiful piece of work, and especially interesting in view of the fact that the artist had not followed the usual conception of this dramatic moment in history, but had given his own interpretation of the tragedy.

The jailer was awed as he gazed on the masterpiece and was so impressed with it that he immediately interested himself in its lowly creator. The story of the picture soon spread throughout the jail and the other inmates would stand before the cell and gaze in wonderment on the work. They finally referred to it as "The Cell of the Christ," and never did an inmate pass that cell that he didn't pause to bow and cross himself in deep respect.

This work of art was all the more remarkable because of the fact that the man who drew this picture was illiterate and didn't possess even the semblance of a common school education. In fact, he had never been able



**Hope Hampton Established a Precedent When She Paid the Author a Royalty  
in Addition to a Handsome Price for "The Maid of Molokai"**



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to concentrate long enough to learn how to read or to write his own name. And yet, without aid of any kind he had created a work of art that would arouse the envy of any artist.

Interest increased in the Mexican and "The Cell of the Christ," and before very long visitors came from miles around to see the remarkable drawing. Its fame spread, and tourists journeyed hundreds of miles to pay humble respect to the man's talent. The jailer succeeded in interesting officials of the law and a number of welfare workers, with the result that a concerted move was made to obtain the man's release. This was continued even after the man had been convicted and sent to San Quentin to serve his term. The jailer went to Governor Stephens and appealed to him to use his influence with the parole board to effect the man's release on probation. The Governor listened and was impressed. He agreed to take the question up with the board at its next meeting. Later the parole board paid a visit to the San Bernardino jail, and as the members bowed in rev-

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erence before the masterpiece, one of them said, "The man that did this should be free." They realized that a man with such talent would be of far greater use out in the world than in prison, and agreed that the law owed him a chance to display his talents unhampered by the seclusion he was then undergoing.

So the parole board reported back to Governor Stephens, recommending a pardon, and the Mexican was liberated.

Upon receiving his liberty the Mexican went to Los Angeles and later did some really good work. He painted a remarkable likeness of Abraham Lincoln which aroused considerable admiration, and for a time attracted a great deal of attention.

I became so interested in this remarkable story that I decided to put this man into a screen story. So I wrote a photoplay and called it "The Great Redeemer," which featured House Peters in the leading role and was released by the Metro Company. I believe this story is one of the best I have written. It reproduced a chapter from real

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life and was so strange that it really resembled fiction. The Mexican heard that I had written a story, using him as the central character, and he visited the studio from time to time while the picture was in production and manifested great interest in its progress.

The crucifixion used in the photoplay was painted by a French artist and he spent several weeks working on the canvas. It was about six by four feet in size and was a beautiful work in colors. Two priests from Arizona happened to visit the studio one day and they were so impressed with the painting that they asked Maurice Tourneur, the producer, if he would give them the picture when he was finished with it. He gladly consented, and the painting used in that photoplay now hangs in a little church somewhere in Arizona.

"The Great Redeemer" has been shown in every city, town and hamlet in the United States, and is still being re-booked by exhibitors all over the country. One theatre in Long Beach, Cal., has played the picture six times. In addition to being shown in moving

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picture theatres, it has been booked by churches, educational and uplift societies.

This picture cost ninety-five thousand dollars to make and its producers have realized about half a million dollars from its bookings.

But the unfortunate part of the real story is the fact that while this Mexican inspired others, and no doubt helped many people to lead better lives, yet he seemed to have been unable to help himself. For a few months after his release he committed a bold hold-up and was sent back to prison. However, though he seemed to be bad, I am indebted to him for a beautiful inspiration and the public perhaps is a little better because he lived.

The screen, press and pulpit are the three great factors in the life of civilized peoples. United, they could make or break a nation. There are about two thousand daily newspapers printed in the United States. There are about twenty thousand moving picture theatres and approximately two hundred thousand churches. The combined readers of these newspapers are over a quarter of the total population, every day. The churches

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reach a little over a quarter of the population once a week. Over five thousand churches in the United States are equipped with moving picture machines.

Those who are writing for the screen should remember this when writing their stories and not overlook the fact that, if the story has a powerful theme and one which will improve the morals of the public, they have a large potential field in the churches which are now showing pictures, aside from the twenty thousand theatres.

In reciting these experiences I trust the reader will not accuse me of being immodest or vainglorious. I have done only what thousands of others can do, provided they have creative ability; an analytical and synthetic mind. I have tried to prove that we are surrounded with ideas, and that if we are observing and receptive, how simple it is to find a story. Nothing in the world is so fascinating or dramatic as life itself. It is the lives that millions of us are living that furnish the novelist, playwright and photodramatist with material for their work. If some terrible



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catastrophe should sweep every individual, with the exception of one, from the earth, and that one individual happened to be a writer, he would have nothing to write about. He would have nothing to write about because there would be no civilized life. And where there is no civilized life there is no drama, romance, intrigue, suspense or action. There would be no ideas. But as long as we have civilization we will have ideas, and if we look around we will surely find them.

Perhaps by this time, the reader has concluded that I get all my ideas from the newspapers. Because real news, published facts, happened to have supplied me with some of my best material is not sufficient to warrant the statement that all my stories were gleaned from newspapers. Some of them have been personal experiences and others have been the experiences of my friends and acquaintances.

We are not all of the same mind, and therefore we do not see many things in the same light that others do. The reader might pick up the morning paper and discover a story which would so interest him that he

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would become inspired to write a story, using that particular piece of news as his basic theme. Another writer might read the same story and fail to become enthused. Writers secure their ideas in many different places. The system which works for one may not succeed for others. It depends on the way the brain works. We all have different likes and dislikes and something which might appeal to one might not interest another. Some writers are incessant news readers. They scan every publication which relates the doings of the people and races everywhere. Situations strange, odd and sometimes erratic are found in the happenings of real life. The professional writer is able to recognize the appealing idea and mould it into something which will amuse and interest.

Some time ago, a clipping agency was started in the East for the purpose of supplying writers with strange and unusual happenings printed in the columns of the daily newspapers throughout the country. For a nominal fee, these clippings were supplied the subscribers each week. But the agency failed

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through lack of support. It discovered that not all writers turned to facts for fiction. Some writers can read every publication in the world without getting many impressions.

Some writers are dreamers. They can lie on their backs in quiet, deserted places and have perfectly good ideas come to them. For some it is the inspiration of the ocean; others seek the seclusion of the mountains, while others do their best work on the desert or in the forest.

The matter of taking advantage of happenings in real life is something which does not always work out for the beginner. He is usually inclined to take the printed situation too literally and fails to dress it with flights of fancy and activity that are demanded by pictures. Very often, the resentful aspirant who declares that his returned story happened in real life, does not realize that true occurrences sometimes violate logic to a great degree.

Then there is the writer with the radio mind. He is ever on the alert, and his hearing is highly sensitive, and attuned to catch phrases or sentences as they waft through the



H. H. Van Loan, Dorothy Dalton, Thomas H. Ince and C. Gardner Sullivan Discussing the  
Script of "Vive la France"



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air. A clever line or pretty phrase is sufficient to inspire a corking good story.

Other writers get most of their ideas from mingling with crowds and watching people. They like to wander along the streets and their eyes are trained to study the actions and movements of people, and some dramatic incident witnessed on the main thoroughfare will supply the spark of enthusiasm and they will return home and immediately start to work. The main street of any large city is filled with comedy and drama, and if our eyes are keen and our minds receptive we won't have much difficulty in finding good material.

To know a story: that is the most important part of writing. The majority of writers never sit down before their typewriter until they have something in mind—until they know what they are going to do. I know a few who make it a rule to put in several hours a day writing something. They make it a daily task and will work four or five hours, just to keep themselves in training, even if they tear everything up and throw it away when they have finished. Very often these writers hit

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upon something good, with the aid of vibrations, and turn out great stuff. It is true that many great inspirations have come in this manner.

Then there is the writer who spends most of his time traveling. He is of the opinion that a change is necessary and an incentive to better work. A change is always good. Strange countries, with different atmosphere and interesting customs, together with new faces, will inspire the writer and keep him from getting rusty.

One day during the year 1913, I was standing before the Mosque of Ahmed, in Constantinople. It was just at sundown and I was watching the moslems as they entered the Mosque to offer their evening prayer to Allah. Something about that throng interested me, and yet for some time I was unable to discover just what it was. Then it suddenly dawned on me. In all that crowd, there was not one hanum, or woman. They were all men. I inquired of a passing Arab the reason for this, and he informed me that Turkish women were not permitted to enter a mosque

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except once a year, during the Feast of Ramazan. When I questioned him further, he smiled and jokingly informed me that they didn't know how to pray.

I remembered that little incident and vowed that some day I would use it as the basis of a story. Six years later I wrote it and sold it to the Universal Film Company. It was called "The Virgin of Stamboul" and Priscilla Dean appeared in the leading role. The story was written around a girl named "Sari," whose soul was supposed to be "as filth in the streets of Stamboul." She overhears an Englishman tell an American the reason a Turkish girl is not permitted in a mosque. Her curiosity is aroused and she succeeds in getting into the mosque for the purpose of learning how to pray. What she sees there furnishes enough plot to keep the story moving for some time.

Nearly every situation was inspired by the customs of the Turkish people and I was thus aided in my effort to put some tense drama



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into the story. My discovery that there were three forms of marriage ceremony in Turkey assisted me in building up a rather interesting dramatic situation.



**House Peters Will Be Remembered for His Excellent Portrayal of "Dan Molloy" in "The Great Redeemer"**



## CHAPTER III

### KNOW YOUR SUBJECT

In the previous chapter we discussed at great length the "idea," and I endeavored to point out to the reader, from my fund of personal experience, where to look for them and how to recognize them. In this chapter I am going to try and show you the value of knowing your subject.

The sale of an idea does not mean anything so far as the future is concerned, unless the foundation of knowing is with the writer. The aspiring writer should know his or her subject before attempting to write it.

Do not write of countries which are so strange to you that you don't know whether Lloyd's is a town in the Austrian Tyrol or a clam-shell emporium. Do not paint a wonderful Alaskan background for a South American crap game. Do not make your hero a Russian cossack, when your knowledge of race is confined to the Pueblo tribe of Indians.

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Make your hero, your heroine and the rest of your characters those with whom you are perfectly familiar.

If you live in New York City, and have never been west of Buffalo, do not write a story about Iceland. If you have never been west of Maine, do not attempt to paint a picture of the great American desert. Remember your audience is intelligent and doubtless contains many nomads who have wandered from Greenland to Cape Town.

"When fairly educated or travelled people go to see the productions vauntingly advertised, they are amazed and disgusted with the gross ignorance shown by directors and the principals," says Bessie Agnes Dwyer, in a recent criticism.

"For instance: In the 'Call of the North' no less a person than Jack Holt appears as lacking in either ordinary information or ordinary sense. Everyone knows that when the Hudson Bay Company, and its rivals, operated in the frozen North, that Durham tobacco had not been manufactured. The trappers and factors smoked and chewed plug—when they

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could get it. But this very young elegante, very much infatuated with a Gillette shave, a jersey and tight breeches—in which he would have promptly frozen to death or been frost bitten, in the regions portrayed, sits casually on tables and fallen trees, and ‘rolls his own’ from a Durham tobacco bag.

“The young lady in the case flits about in the icy moonlight, in a costume calculated to give her congestion of both lungs inside of twenty minutes. The rifles used are Martinis. The latest type of self cocking pistols are freely displayed. The whole thing is ridiculous, impossible and a perfect travesty of fact—and easily ascertained facts.

“In ‘Fools Paradise,’ leaving to one side the garishness and clumsiness of the Mexican oil camp scenes—and I know Mexico—when Burmah is invaded, the picture does violence to the most sacred instinct of the human mind—religion. It portrays a French dancer on a throne of Buddha wagging her head and making sensuous passes with her hands, while Javanese dancers, in Court costume, dance before her.

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"This is positively scandalous to the people of the East and any woman, white or otherwise, attempting this in one of their temples, would be torn to pieces. We will pass over the crocodiles and the incident of the lady throwing her glove into their den. That incident is doubtless suggested by history and not bad—as it goes, but the temple scene is atrocious and worse—it is impossible.

"We Americans spend millions to Christianize the Orient, and permit ourselves to be depicted before the gaze of millions of Orientals in anything but desirable way. I have often wondered why the Federation of American Club Women did not investigate and through the War Department, or the State Department, curb this ever growing evil.

"In the Orient, I have seen the branding of a white woman, on the screen, by a Japanese Prince. The entire audience sat dumbfounded as well they might. I have seen the awful fights of gangsters, the housebreaking, safe-cracking, woman throttling acts, happily somewhat barred, by public demand, in our theatres. In such wise, and merely to make



Dorothy Dalton Gave One of the Best Performances of Her Career, as  
"Jeannette Bouchette" in "Vive la France"





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money, do these movie magnates represent the supposedly dominant and superior race, in Japan, China, India, the Philippines, Java, Ceylon—all the lands beyond the Pacific.

“Let the picture people censor and eliminate from foreign export, the libels on this country, its morals and its manners, they have so liberally produced and exploited.”

The foregoing was a letter which appeared in the Los Angeles Times, July 3rd, 1922, and is typical of the criticisms which are frequently made of moving picture productions. I have quoted it in order to show that the average moving picture patron possesses intellect. One critic recently made the ridiculous statement that eighty percent of moving picture audiences are composed of uneducated and illiterate people. The moving picture appeals to the highest as well as the lowest form of intelligence, and because of this fact it is enjoying tremendous popularity, and the producer who fails to take this into consideration, and believes that a glaring error or inconsistency will go unnoticed, is fooling no one but himself.

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I do not know Bessie Agnes Dwyer. But I was interested in her criticism, for she speaks for the millions of moving picture fans and is a living denial of those who seem to think that our audiences are made up of stupid and ignorant people. The mistakes she pointed out were most inexcusable and reveal primarily the ignorance of the writers and their subjects. If they had been thoroughly conversant with the countries they wrote about, there would not have been such flagrant errors as have been pointed out to us. In such cases, the director is not all to blame and the producer is only partially at fault. The writer, alone, is responsible for such mistakes. The producer and director no doubt believed the authors of these particular stories were familiar with their subjects and never questioned the small details. Anyone who will write a story about a country with which he is not familiar is indeed doing a very daring thing. We do not say that it can't be done. It has been done. The best history of the French Revolution was written by a gentleman by the name of Carlisle. And yet

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he had never crossed the English Channel. But he spent years in writing that immortal work. The stories criticized by our friend were probably written in three or four weeks.

Know your subject. This is one of the best tips I can give to the aspiring writer. Don't write about anything, unless you are familiar with it. You cannot write illuminatingly about Alaska unless you've been there. I would never have attempted to write a story like "The Virgin of Stamboul" if I hadn't visited Constantinople.

About a year ago I decided I would like to write a story using the great northwest as a background. So I packed my bag and journeyed twenty-five hundred miles through the north country, and remained away four months. About three years ago I became afflicted with a desire to write a Hawaiian story. So I bought a ticket and sailed down the Pacific to Honolulu, where I remained nine weeks. Upon my return I wrote a story called "The Maid of Molokai."

Now the Hawaiians are a very superstitious race. They have many legends, some of them

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weird and others very beautiful, which they are very willing to explain to the visitor. There is one I remember in particular. It was told to me by some of the natives of Hilo. Hilo is on the island of Hawaii, and is located thirty miles from Kilauea crater. They declare that when the volcano is on the verge of an eruption the fish in the harbor at Hilo turn red. I used this legend to good advantage in my story, as a great deal of the action took place on the island of Hawaii, in the city of Hilo and around the volcano. My story fell into the hands of a continuity writer, whose knowledge of the world was limited to Brooklyn, N. Y., and Los Angeles, with the result that this writer, while making the adaptation struck out the use I made of this legend. When I learned of this, I immediately informed her that I had not written about Hawaii from knowledge I had gleaned in a New York flat, but had spent approximately five thousand dollars for the purpose of getting local color and that I knew what I was writing about. That work was distorted and defaced by this continuity writer, who, despite

## ***Know Your Subject***

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her limited knowledge, possessed a remarkable egotism and bombastic arrogance, and in the end she completely ruined what I considered to be one of my best stories.

Many times in the past the author has found that despite his experience, gleaned from traveling and coming into contact with strange and extraordinary adventures in various remote corners of the earth, he has found himself completely at the mercy of a continuity writer whose limited knowledge about everything in general, endangered a really meritorious piece of work over which a great deal of time, care and thought has been spent.

Know your subject. Know it thoroughly, and then such errors as Miss Dwyer has pointed out will be avoided. You must remember that producers and directors are not infallible, and they assume when they receive a story from a writer that the details are accurate. Don't attempt to write a story until you have made an exhaustive study of your subject. See to it that the settings are accurate. If you were writing a story wherein a scene of a "city room" of a metropolitan daily is re-

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quired, you wouldn't have the floor nicely swept, the desks bared and the "copy" boys resembling little Fauntleroyes. You would have the desks and floors littered with newspapers and copy paper and the boys would be hardened youngsters with hair dishevelled and frowning countenances. The City Editor would probably be in his shirt-sleeves and would be smoking either a pipe or cigar. If you have never worked on a newspaper, then before you wrote that scene you should pay a visit to a newspaper office and make a careful study of it in order that the setting you describe will be correct. Perhaps the director would build that set in the studio, and then he would rely to a great extent on your description.

When I wrote "The Virgin of Stamboul" I described every scene and setting with minute detail; the types of characters to be found on the streets of Stamboul and their manner of dress; the shops and their contents and the customs of the people. Perhaps the director would not be familiar with that country and would rely upon my description. That

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### *Know Your Subject*

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script was in 150,000 words, and in addition to the story, every piece of action was described and the movements of every character in the story were told in detail. In addition to this, I purchased a set of pictures showing the style of architecture of the houses which skirted the principal streets. Then I added a statement to the effect that I knew Stamboul, that I had spent some time there, and would vouch for the accuracy of everything in the story. The result was that Director Tod Browning followed my script closely and the street scenes in addition to the interiors were exactly as I had described them. Of course this meant a great deal of labor on my part—labor which, to the non-initiated, might seem unnecessary—but in the end I was rewarded by knowing that if there were any inaccuracies I alone was to blame. I spent three months writing that story.

During the years 1911 to 1914 I spent all my time travelling abroad, and I confess it has stood me in good stead since then. Knowledge gleaned in foreign countries will make us familiar with this sort of stories when we



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are inspired, and we will be cautious about having caravans camped beneath towering palm trees on the Sahara. The Sahara isn't partial to palm trees, and the few to be found there are short and not so artistic as the tall, graceful ones which grow in California and the South Seas.

Everything is accepted by the traveler as being new. Of course it isn't new, but it is new to him, and thus he becomes inspired, and sometimes he is able to give us something which seems new, even though it is as old as creation.

In the past, the screen author has not been a traveler, but has been content to glean what he thought was necessary for his "atmosphere" from books of reference. But the professional photodramatist of today is not satisfied to do that, and many of those who are creating stories for the screen today are men and women who have traveled extensively. Many of them have gone abroad during the past year or two, and some of them are planning to make annual trips to Europe for the purpose of getting material for their work.



Bessie Love



## ***Know Your Subject***

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However, I do not think it is necessary for a beginner to travel in search of new ideas. Some very excellent stories are written every year by writers who have not wandered far from their own back-yard.

One critic declared, after seeing "The New Moon" that it was evident I had gleaned my knowledge of Russia from weekly periodicals and newspapers. I took the trouble to inform that critic that I had had the pleasure of representing a chain of American newspapers abroad, and had traveled the length and breadth of Russia, and would vouch for the accuracy of the detail in my story.

So, you see, even though we have had the necessary experience, and have written a story using a background which is familiar to us, we don't always get the credit for our effort. There are more stories, with foreign atmosphere, written for the screen than there are books, plays and novels, and the professional moving picture critic should spend some time abroad so that he will be able to intelligently criticise stories with foreign backgrounds.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONSTRUCTING THE STORY

Successful screen writing is merely developing the power of imagination. The better you develop it the better your story will be, and the more money you will receive for it. Do not permit yourself to be bored by doing the same thing over and over again. If you do, then there is no pleasure in your work. If you cannot enjoy your work then you will not find success. Endeavor to make each story better than the last one. Let each story you write be a supreme effort to produce something as nearly perfect as you possibly can make it. Imagination and concentration will accomplish great things for you.

The collapse of a building is seldom due to its foundation. The cause is usually attributed to poor construction, faulty ironwork or weak walls. It is so with a story. The theme may be a good one, and worthy of sustaining a big, powerful drama, but if the construc-

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### *Constructing the Story*

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tion is weak, incoherent and unconvincing, then the whole story collapses. If the author uses imagination in writing the story, and concentrates on each scene, each situation, and works them out to the best of his ability, there need be little worry about disposing of the completed script.

It is often said that all that is necessary is an idea. My experience has been to the contrary. A producer is interested in any good idea, but he is more interested in the way the idea is developed. The theme may be an interesting one, but the producer is more concerned about the construction of the story. The idea is merely the basis or foundation.

The first one to be sold on a story is the writer himself. First, he must have a good theme. There must be a good reason for the story, and the theme is the reason. With that as the foundation, work must then be started on the construction. After the story is completed the author should read it carefully. He should put himself in the place of the producer and try and imagine himself the prospective purchaser. If the completed manu-

## ***"How I Did It"***

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script is fool-proof, and is really a big and meritorious piece of work, it will be sold. If the author tries to make his story "different," if it is based on a good theme, with plenty of atmosphere, tense situations, dramatic suspense, sufficient romance to flavor it, and considerable mystery and intrigue, all of which lead up to a strong climax, it will find a ready market.

Do not inject too much atmosphere. Too much atmosphere interrupts the plot and interferes with the smoothness of the story. Don't clutter up the script with a lot of scenes and things which have no direct bearing on the plot or the outcome of the story. These things will only delay the action and cause the picture to drag. There is no better cure for insomnia than a story that drags. Many good stories have been spoiled because the author tarried too long and introduced an over-abundance of atmosphere, and bits of detail, which had no connection with the ultimate climax.

Recently I wrote a story around a matador of Spain, entitled "The Siren of Seville."



Eugene O'Brien





### *Constructing the Story*

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The colorful background offered many possibilities for innumerable expensive sets. The matador is a very picturesque character; a very heroic and romantic figure. The realization of this, together with the interesting customs of the Spanish people—especially the Sevillanos—provided a wealth of material. But it was necessary to ignore everything which could not be conveniently woven into the plot, otherwise the progress of the story would be retarded. Every scene should advance the plot. Pretty scenes mean nothing unless they are used as a background for action. Beautiful shots are worthless if we are sacrificing interest in order to show them. Nothing should be introduced unless it has a real important connection with the plot. In a story with foreign atmosphere, the author must necessarily introduce the customs of the people, but he should never stop his story to do it. The customs should play an important part in the plot of the story, so that while we are interesting and amusing our audience, we are instructing and educating them as well.

## ***"How I Did It"***

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Take the audience with you. Confuse your characters, and lead the audience to believe it is being taken into your confidence. But surprise it at the right moment. Permit me to modestly refer to a situation in "The Virgin of Stamboul." Achmet Hamid returns to his harem and finds Resha, his favorite wife, in the arms of the American, Hector Barron. She locks the romantic lover in a closet. Hamid enters and asks her for the key. He then goes to the door of the closet, inserts the key, and even unlocks the door. When I reached this place in the story I paused. Thus far, I had taken the audience into my confidence. I had taken it far enough. Now I must add some suspense. The audience would conclude that Hamid would open the door, permit Barron to come out and then thrash him; perhaps kill him. Well, as that was what the audience would expect, I would inject the element of surprise. I would surprise the audience by surprising Resha. I would prevent Hamid from doing the very thing Resha believed he was going to do. Resha would be amazed. But I wasn't thinking of Resha. I

### *Constructing the Story*

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was thinking of my audience. In order to amaze my audience I had to amaze Resha. The most dignified way of surprising the audience is through the characters. Never deliberately fool your audience. It isn't nice, and your audience doesn't like it.

Now then, I knew the audience would have at least one excuse for remaining in the theatre. The cunning Hamid returned the key to Resha, and, apparently confessing his jealousy, expressed a desire to atone for his "fleeting doubt," and promised to bring her a gift, "one worthy of your cleverness, the most costly in all Stamboul." Again, the audience would have an excuse for not going home. Resha wondered what that gift would be. So would the audience. Then I stopped work for two days. I too, began to wonder. What would Hamid bring Resha for a present? I pondered over this for some time. I must have him bring her something she would least expect; something the audience would least expect. Finally, it came to me. I would have Hamid kill Barron and bring Resha the blood-stained dagger! My purpose in doing this

### ***"How I Did It"***

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was two-fold: to have the audience wonder as to the nature of the punishment Hamid was to mete out to Barron, and the nature of the gift Resha was to receive. But, greater than all else, my object was to keep the audience in the theater by holding its attention and interest in this picture.

It is often true that during the writing of a story, the author will be traveling so fast toward the climax that he arrives there before he should. I realized this during the writing of the story just mentioned. I brought Sari into the house where Hamid and Pemberton were fighting, and discovered I was rushing toward a climax which threatened to be usual and commonplace; perhaps not in keeping with the rest of the story. After I brought Sari into the house, and she had heard the fighting going on upstairs, and had seen the plaster fall, I stopped work for another day. As far as I could see, there was only one climax to that story: Pemberton would come downstairs, after killing Hamid, take Sari in his arms, and then the fade-out.



Guy Bates Post and H. H. Van Loan



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### *Constructing the Story*

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“Fine,” I argued with myself, “but why not surprise Sari and the audience just once more?”

Then I got it. The audience would be looking for Pemberton to descend the stairs to the room where Sari was waiting. All right; but I would delay his coming, and meantime would bring the evil Hamid down first, and lead them to believe that Pemberton had been killed. Then Hamid would drop dead at Sari’s feet, as he was about to take her in his arms. After Sari and the audience had been sufficiently surprised, I would bring Pemberton down. A very small twist, but exhibitors all over the country told me this was the biggest punch in the story.

My only purpose in citing these experiences is to show how much more we can get out of our story if we will spend time, care and thought in its preparation. This will improve the construction. It is not advisable to leave a situation until we are thoroughly convinced we have handled it to the best of our ability. My motto, when I come to a really important situation, is to work it out



## ***"How I Did It"***

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exactly in the way the audience least expects. The way this is done is by rejecting ideas until you find the right one.

In writing a photoplay, the author should always keep in mind that the actor merely portrays the emotions the author seeks to arouse in the audience, and unless the actor is given big dramatic situations to interpret, the emotions of the audience will remain unmoved. The author knows when he is doing his best, for his own emotions are the first to be aroused, and if he doesn't get a thrill as he writes he cannot expect the producer or the audience to receive something he has not put into his story. Nobody knows better than the author when he has done a good piece of work. And when he has finished a good story, his judgment of values is capable of deciding whether the story will be sold. He may have to submit it to several producers before it is accepted, but in the end he sees his work has finally been appreciated.

If I ever sold a story to the first producer to whom I submitted it, I would believe the millennium had arrived. "The Virgin of Stam-

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### *Constructing the Story*

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boul," "The New Moon," "The Great Redeemer," "Fightin' Mad" and the majority of my stories, made the usual rounds, calling on nearly all the producers before they were accepted. One producer said "The Virgin of Stamboul" was a costume picture and would not be received by the public. It was not a costume picture. A costume picture is a picture using for its background a certain period in history. "Deception" was a costume picture; "Passion" also was in that class, and others include "The Queen of Sheba," "Theodora," "Robin Hood" and "Nero." "The Virgin of Stamboul" was a story of Turkey and Stamboul as they are today, and therefore could not possibly be a costume picture. It is true that costume pictures have never made much money. This is because the people of today are not particularly interested in the events of yesterday. The present and the future arouses our interest, but we cannot become enthused over the ages that have passed and its people of whom we know so little. I would not advise a beginner to write a costume story; in fact, I wouldn't suggest it

### ***"How I Did It"***

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to anyone. They are really a drug on the scenario market.

I am in favor of the type of story which starts right out with mystery and suspense, and which holds the interest of the audience until the end. For this reason, I like to write crook melodramas. There's lots of fun in writing stories of this nature. I find enjoyment in creating them. I have often started a story of this sort and didn't have the slightest idea where I was going with the plot or how all the mystery was going to be smoothed out in the end. That's where the fun came in. An author, if he takes his work seriously, gets more enjoyment out of a story than anyone else.

## CHAPTER V

### SUSPENSE

One of the most important things to remember if you are attempting to write photoplays, is the interest of the audience. In order to create interest that is sustained throughout the entire story, you must have a well-founded plot. It must be a plot that demands action, suspense, drama, tense situations and romance. Take your audience into your confidence, to a certain extent, but do not disclose your climax until you get there. You can confuse your actors all you like, and mislead them as much as you choose, for in so doing you will be amusing and interesting your audience. But, it is a good plan to give your story a different twist at the finish. This acts as a surprise. People don't object to being surprised, but they don't like to be fooled. A story with a different twist at the end will be well liked and the fans will go out and talk about it. Talk is largely responsible for the success of anything.

### ***"How I Did It"***

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Probably those who saw "The Wonderful Chance," with Eugene O'Brien, did not guess how that story was going to end. I intended that they shouldn't guess it, and those who saw the picture know whether I succeeded in keeping the outcome a secret until the very end. In fact I will admit that I didn't know myself how that story was going to end until I had almost completed it. That's where the fun often comes in for the writer. To live with a set of characters for weeks at a time until they seem to be living, breathing human beings, is an enjoyment few have experienced unless they have written a story. But to see those characters come to life before your eyes, and realize that you created them, and that they are doing the things you prescribed for them, gives the author considerable pleasure; a pleasure indescribable and appreciated only by those who have experienced it.

"The Wonderful Chance" was a story based on actual facts. The entire first and second reels were a picturization of an incident which transpired in New York City a few years ago and is a part of the police record.

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## *Suspense*

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The bird-cage incident actually happened, and the sentimental burglar who released the canary was arrested on suspicion by Inspector Faurot, Chief of the Detective Bureau. The criminal maintained he was innocent, and only confessed when, as he was being put through the "third degree," the Inspector suddenly hurled at him the question, "Why'n Hell did you let that bird out of the cage?" The man, caught off his guard, registered guilt. He realized the game was up and confessed. The criminal had left no clue, apparently, but an empty bird-cage, and it was due to the marvelous deduction of Inspector Faurot that the man was arrested and later sent back to Sing Sing.

Out of a list of thirty-six convicts released from Sing Sing three days before a certain burglary was committed in Brooklyn, the Inspector picked out the man he believed capable of possessing sentiment enough to release an imprisoned bird from a cage in a home the man had visited and burglarized. The deduction was perfect and one of the finest pieces of detective work on record.

## ***"How I Did It"***

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The bird-cage incident inspired "The Wonderful chance." It was the motive, premise or theme, and the scene wherein the burglar opened the cage and gave the bird its freedom was the best situation in the story. It was the best because it was the truth, and was stranger than fiction. Of course in the story it was not advisable to send our hero, "Swagger Barlow," back to prison. That would have meant a repetition of plot. Therefore the hero was made to reform. Then the next step was to put obstacles in his path and surround him with temptations in order to make the struggle between the good and evil forces. "Swagger Barlow" was the type of man who, through environment and circumstances over which he had no control, became a law-breaker. He was bad. But he didn't want to be bad; he wanted to be good. He wanted to be a credit to society. He knew he could be a gentleman if opportunity would only give him a chance. His desire had always been to move in the best circles; to be respected and admired by the better class. All his life he had been waiting for the



Tom Mix Appeared in "The Speed Maniac" and "Three Gold Coins"





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## *Suspense*

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wonderful chance to be a gentleman. Finally the opportunity came, and it came as it usually does, when it is least expected. Like many other young men, "Swagger Barlow" recognized it when it came and grasped it. He could be a gentleman. He would prove it. He did, and he received a just reward.

Every story should have a moral. "The Wonderful Chance" had one. It pointed out the necessity for our recognizing opportunity—the wonderful chance—when it comes to us. It may be thrust upon us, just as it was on "Swagger Barlow," but the main thing is to grasp it.

Perhaps those who saw this picture went home and talked about it. Supposing that they did, what incident or situation remained stamped indelibly on their minds? The bird-cage incident. It was "different." Although it may have seemed like fiction, it was fact. I desired to deliver my message through that particular incident. The finer qualities in the soul of "Swagger Barlow," which made him dislike seeing anything caged up, after the long years he had spent in prison, was a beau-

## ***"How I Did It"***

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tiful sentiment. I do not take the credit for it and it was all the more beautiful because it was lifted from a chapter of life and was something that absolutely happened. It was my reason for writing the story.

Give your audience something to remember; something they will think about and talk about, after leaving the theatre, and your story will be a success. If you give them only one incident which will remain in their memory, your labor has not then been in vain. If they forget your story the next day, then you have no reason, or right, to be proud of your work.

Don't preach any doctrines, and refrain from making your story appear as propaganda. People go to the churches when they want sermons, and attend lectures when they wish to fill up on any particular subject. Give them thrilling melodrama, and if you wish to convey a good thought or show the results of a kindly deed, drop it into your plot. But don't feature it, or gloat over it through the entire story. Your audience is intelligent. The man who recently stated that the average

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picture audience is composed of people who have the mind and intellect of a fourteen-year-old should himself be wearing swaddling clothes. The most brilliant minds on earth are regular attendants at moving picture theatres because it is the greatest source of entertainment, amusement and instruction, all combined into one, that the world has ever known. Your audience is intelligent, and if you want to slip it a little message, it will get it without any unnecessary effort on your part.

If you have only one scene in your story that will arouse discussion and commendation, your story is a success. People will go out and talk about that one scene. Try and put a message in every story you write. See that it has a moral in it. Avoid sordid things. Make them laugh a little and cry a little, but send them away feeling good, and if possible, in better spirits than when they entered. Make your heroes real, manly men, and don't let them do absurd things. Keep your heroines sweet and above adverse criticism. Try to show the beautiful things there are in the world, and don't continually depict

## ***"How I Did It"***

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the unpleasantness about us. Don't make your heroine a poor stenographer who falls into the evil arms of her employer. Other girls in other walks of life are just as susceptible to temptation and stub their toes just as easily. Don't always pick on the stenographer. Lots of them are good and not all of them are poor.

Waste no superfluous words. The main thing to bear in mind is, first, to establish a reason for your story, and then start for the climax. Perhaps the best definition of any story is a premise and a chase. It is better to limit the number of characters to as few as possible. Too many principals confuse the audience and tend to complicate matters and involve the plot. This results in the audience mixing labor with its amusement. Those who go to the theatre are seeking relaxation from personal or business cares and they want to be amused and interested without any great mental effort. Too many leading characters make it hard for the audience to follow the story, and subtract instead of adding to the interest.



William Desmond Made a Phenomenal Hit in "Fightin' Mad"



## *Suspense*

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The most important element in a photoplay is suspense. A story that has plenty of thrilling suspense is sure to be a success. Every successful photoplay has it. Who can forget that remarkable scene in "The Miracle Man," when that little youngster, who had been physically twisted and distorted since birth, hesitated as he gazed with eyes filled with faith towards "the miracle man." There was suspense. The audience sat breathless as it wondered what was going to happen next. In order to prolong that suspense, Director Tucker cut from the boy to Thomas Meighan, Betty Compson and Joseph Dowling. Both Betty Compson and Meighan stood motionless as they stared toward the boy. The situation was worked up to such a height that the audience by this time was experiencing every emotion reflected by the actors, and, when the boy dropped his crutches and started stumbling unaided up the path toward Joseph Dowling, it was the culmination of a suspense never before equalled on the screen. That scene, alone, was sufficient to make that picture a success.



### ***"How I Did It"***

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In that great Thomas H. Ince production, "Behind the Door," there was some tremendous suspense. The commander of a German submarine seizes the wife of the captain of a merchant ship and submerges with her while her husband is powerless to interfere. He knows what her fate will be, and as the grinning face of the commander appears at a port-hole, the captain shakes his fist at him and vows that he will find him some day, and when he does, he will skin him alive!

Months later, the merchant ship is attacked by a submarine and she fights back and sends the evil craft to the bottom. There is one survivor. That survivor is the man who stole the captain's wife. From the moment the German commander is brought aboard the ship, until the last scene in the picture, the entire sequence is filled with suspense. It was thrilling, and the audience sat there tense and speechless, enjoying every foot of it, and never relaxed until the last scene in the picture was reached. The popularity of "Behind the Door" was due to that two reels of suspense.

## *Suspense*

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Both of these stories were written by authors who know the value of suspense. Frank L. Packard handled it like a master in "The Miracle Man," and the same can be said of Gouverneur Morris and "Behind the Door." The directors and casts deserve great praise for the way in which they interpreted their roles, but the stories were fool-proof. A fool-proof story is bound to bring forth the best efforts of a director and his actors because they are inspired to do their best.

Who can forget the masterful way in which Griffith handled suspense in "Orphans of the Storm?" He tore the blind Louise from her sister, Henriette, and then took all the time he desired in bringing them together again. And all this time he was working on the emotions of his audience to such an extent that when the scene is reached where Henriette sees Louise from the balcony and yet is unable to reach her, the patron is not occupying one-half of the seat which he paid for when he entered. It's hard to equal that sort of suspense, and it's always sure-fire. But it's nothing more than every-day, dyed-in-the-

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wool, blown-in-the-bottle melodrama. But Griffith is a master at it. He knows the value of suspense and he always gives it to us. He gave us a lot of it in "Way Down East." There, it was the famous ice scene, when Lillian Gish is floating down the river on a cake of ice and Barthelmess is trying to reach her. He prolonged that suspense until the girl gets to the very edge of the falls, and by that time the spectator is almost a nervous wreck. But the audience loves it. The public loves to be thrilled. That's why there's always a crowd around an accident or an arrest. That's why the newspapers devote considerable space to deeds of daring. We love to be thrilled, and the writer who can thrill his audience by giving it excellent suspense is sure to find his work in great demand.



**Guy Price, Dramatic Editor of the Los Angeles Herald, and "Real Pal" of the Author**



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## CHAPTER VI

### PERSISTENCY

The secret of success in any walk of life is merely to know what the public wants, and then being able to serve it in the most attractive manner. For those who can do this, and who manifest an infinite capacity for taking pains, there is great reward. The world refers to such persons as geniuses. The first one to discover your worth, your possibilities, is you. If you honestly and sincerely believe that you are capable of writing photoplays you will win out. It is unfortunate that the struggle to succeed is difficult and usually demands considerable sacrificing and suffering, but this is because our whole system of things is wrong. But as it is too late now to change that system, we will probably have to be contented with it.

Study your public and find out what it wants. Also find out what it doesn't want. While you're doing this, you must aim to

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please the women. A story that doesn't interest the feminine portion of your audience is not a success. If the women endorse a picture it is certain to be a success. Wives inform their husbands of their likes and dislikes. The young man asks his sweetheart which one of the current productions she would like to see. He goes where she wants to go. Then, too, you must remember that women always outnumber the men in any amusement place. The success of Cecil B. De Mille's pictures is due to the fact that he appeals to the women with his productions. The majority of his productions feature the feminine sex, and in addition to this he usually dresses his pictures well. He provides the feminine stars with fashionable clothes and surrounds them with great luxuries. Naturally, this all interests the women, even though such an atmosphere is entirely beyond their expectations.

There has never been a time when the producers were so eager to get good screen stories, and there has never been such a theatre-going public as there is today.

## *Persistency*

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“The era of good films is arriving,” says Thomas H. Ince. “The most important of all factors having to do with the continued popularity of the screen is new story material for pictures, stories of sufficient interest and basic theme to hold the attention of American and European audiences.

“There has been much talk during the last year of motion pictures having lost the good will of the American public and of American pictures losing their great international following.

“After a five months’ sojourn in New York, during which I came into contact with most of the leaders of every branch of the industry and having every opportunity to study every phase of the picture screen away from my studios, I am convinced that pictures, particularly the splendid American productions of the finished type, are just coming into their greatest day.

“I intend to devote more attention than ever before to the story foundation for it has been my observation that the picture-going



### ***"How I Did It"***

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millions have never been indifferent toward a good screen story."

The trouble in the past has been, to a great extent, a lack of sufficiently good stories. We have been conscious of a pronounced lack of truth, or originality and spontaneous appeal in the story. There has been a continued foisting upon audiences of threadbare and ill-chosen plots. Also poor stories, and the distortion of both plot and characters, and even titles, when a picture was supposedly made from some well-known book or play. The public is tired of sex pictures, western melodramas and pictures which are imitations of "hits." As soon as one particular type of story has made a "hit," a group of the smaller producers have been in the habit of sending out a hurry call for a similar one. Recently a picture based on a rather sensational hymn was favorably received in certain sections of the country, and immediately there was a great deal of excitement, on the part of some of the independent producers to make more like it. I submitted a Spanish story to a producer about this time and he handed it back

## *Persistency*

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to me with the remark: "Go and write me a story like 'Where is my Wandering Arbutus Tonight?'" Within a week, I received three requests to write "wandering" stories. I haven't written one of them yet.

The public wants simple, wholesome, human stories, with sincere men, faithful women, and if the public ever wearies of motion pictures it will be for the reason that they haven't appealed to the best that is in it.

Some people think that the moving picture has injured the legitimate stage. Those who know will deny that. There is no clash at all, and each will continue to attract its audiences. When the pictures give us stories that are more consistent, truer reflections of human life, human conflict, human tears and human smiles, rather than sensational and indelicate themes, the moving picture will be more popular than the stage.

The root of the whole matter lies in its youth. It has left its infancy and is developing into a big, ruddy youngster. Youth is susceptible, and the public is to blame for not asking for something better than it has

## ***"How I Did It"***

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had. If some of the pictures have been salacious, it has been because the public wanted it. The producer plays up to the public demand, and the public gets what it wants. If the public manifested enough interest in the Bible, and desired to see it on the screen—all of it, from Genesis to Revelation—the producer would gladly satisfy that demand.

Some people have been of the opinion that the progress of the moving picture is limited and that it hasn't much farther to go. It has made tremendous strides; it is here to stay, and it will make a very noticeable advancement in the future. Its progress will amaze the public, because the producer, the author and the director are determined that it shall improve.

Let us look into the future and prophesy a little. In the first place, there are going to be fewer pictures. But they are going to be bigger and better, because the author is going to spend more time on his stories. Those authors who have been writing ten or fifteen stories a year will not write more than three or four in the future. They will be better

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and bigger stories, and the producer is going to spend more time in making them into pictures. There will be a greater expenditure of money on each production. Thus, when the producer sells his picture he will get more money for it. The exhibitor will take these pictures and run them for an indefinite period in his theatre, and will charge the public more money for seeing them. The public will quite willingly pay the increased admission. The public is always willing to pay a good price for quality. The pictures will be handled very much like legitimate plays and will be booked for a run in each city. The exhibitor will keep the picture in his theatre until the community has seen it. The pictures will probably be shown in only one theatre in each city, and this will enhance their value to the exhibitor, from a box-office viewpoint.

The name of the author will be featured and he will receive the credit for the success or failure of the production. In the past, he has usually received full credit only when the picture was a failure. The success or failure of future productions is going to be solely up

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to the author, and he will not be able to establish a reasonable excuse if it fails. If his stories are good his name will be a box-office attraction and the public will know him by his work.

Certain stars will always enjoy a considerable amount of popularity. But the star's era has passed, and if the author makes good the star will never return to those glorious days of the past when his name outside of a theatre was sufficient to make the public flock to that particular house. In the future he will merely be included in the cast of characters and will receive the praise he deserves for his interpretation of a particular role.

Grim persistency is responsible for most of the success in this world, and if you haven't got that then you had better be satisfied to remain in the procession and trot along with the parade. If you have got an indomitable will power to make good, then some day you'll find yourself up there with the drum major, leading the procession. In fact, you'll be ahead of the drum major.



Warner Oland Played the Male Lead in the Pathe Serial, "The Third Eye"



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You can't write a story overnight. If you do you won't sell it, because you couldn't possibly give it the thought and care it is rightfully entitled to, in that length of time. If you write for one solid year and never sell a line, don't be discouraged. You are receiving a valuable training, during the meantime, and after you've broken the ice and sold your first story, you will look back on those days—perhaps days of discouragement—as the days of your apprenticeship. If it's worth an attempt, it's worth patience.

I wrote for nearly two years before I sold my first story. And like many others, it was quite by accident that I sold it. For the benefit of those who are inclined to become discouraged, I will relate how I came to dispose of my first screen story.

While the World War was in progress, I picked up the evening paper one day and read a remarkable story by an Associated Press correspondent. He had succeeded in getting through the German lines. For some time he was held a prisoner, but later succeeded in making his escape. While within



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the German lines, he happened to be in a small town in France one day while the Germans were marching their captives to the rear. Included in this procession were a large number of attractive French girls, who were being transported to Germany to do manual labor.

As the procession passed, the correspondent noticed that the bosom of each woman was bared and on the center of each woman's breast was painted an ugly cross, in red. The newspaper man was horrified, and he stepped up to a German lieutenant and asked him what the insignia meant. The lieutenant sneeringly replied that these girls had remained obstinate—they would not bend to the German will—and, as a warning to others in the towns through which they would pass, they had been branded with "the cross of shame."

A few months later I was engaged by a film company to make a trip around the world, making scenic pictures. I got as far as Honolulu. The company decided to go into the steel business and I found myself without a

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job, and about 7000 miles from New York. However, the company had been kind enough not to leave me stranded, and cabled me enough money to return to New York, if I cared to come back; if I didn't, they weren't particularly interested.

Arriving in San Francisco, I decided that I would run down to Los Angeles and see "how the movies are made." I did. I liked the place. In fact, I liked it so much that the first thing I knew I had spent my carfare. I was a stranger in a strange land, and decided about the best thing for me to do would be to write some stories, sell them, and then go on to New York. All of which was easier said than done.

So, I started to write. And, the interesting part of it is, that I didn't attempt to write scenarios; it never occurred to me to do so. I was going to write fiction stories, and I was only 3400 miles from the place where they buy such things!

At the time I made the resolution that I would write, I had no idea what I would write about. In fact, with the exception of

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two short stories which I had managed to get out of my system a few years before, I had no concrete proof that I could do what I had resolved I must do.

Finally, I recalled that story of "the cross of shame." I would write a novelette around that fact. The news item had made such an impression on my mind at the time of reading that I remembered every word of it. So I began writing the story, and gave it the title, "The Cross of Shame."

One day, a little later, my wife returned from a shopping jaunt and told me of a very fine picture which was being exhibited in a downtown jewelry store window. It was a painting of Mary Pickford, in the role of a Red Cross nurse. She was kneeling beside the cot of a soldier as she dressed his wounds. The soldier was Wallie Reid.

That evening I sought out this window and studied the painting. It was a beautiful work, with fine tones and excellent lighting, and seemed like the work of a famous artist. As I gazed at this painting I decided that the artist that painted this picture ought to make



Earle Williams, Star of "The Highest Trump," "A Rogue's Romance,"  
 "When a Man Loves," and "Bring Him In"



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some illustrations for my story, "The Cross of Shame." The signature was that of Olga Printzlau, who later worked with William De Mille, and is responsible for such excellent adaptations as "Conrad in Quest of His Youth," "The Bachelor Daddy" and many other successes. I made a note of the name and the next morning found her address in the telephone book, and, calling her up, made an appointment for an interview.

The next afternoon I called at her home, introduced myself and told her the purpose of my visit. She then told me the story of the picture I had admired so much. It had been ordered by Mary Pickford, and it was the first time this famous screen star had ever posed for a painting of herself. Being an ardent admirer of Miss Printzlau's work, she had commissioned her to make the painting, and had paid an excellent price for the picture.

I related to Miss Printzlau the story I was just completing, and asked her if she would make the illustrations. Even though she was very busy at the time, she promised to make every effort to do this work. She was quite

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enthusiastic over my story and asked me if I had disposed of the picture rights. I confessed I had not thought of the screen, and was not interested in that sort of work. I confided to her that I had listened to the grievances of many of my friends who had spent hours and days waiting outside the office of scenario editors, and had resolved long before that I would not subject myself to such embarrassment.

Miss Printzlau then said that she thought I had a "sure-fire" sale in this story, and advised me to waste no time in getting it before a scenario editor, as she was convinced it would result in an immediate sale. I smiled, and raised a protesting hand. You see, I was being forced into it. But she was persistent, and asked me to go and see C. Gardner Sullivan, scenario editor at the Ince Studios, and let him read the story. I confessed that almost all the manuscript was in the office of the publisher in New York—for I had succeeded in selling the story upon submitting the first two chapters—and that all I could give Sullivan

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would be a verbal synopsis. She pleaded with me to take that to him.

"Go and tell it to him," she said. "That's all you need to do. There is such a demand for good stories today that an editor is satisfied merely to get an idea."

I promised her I would think it over. But I admit that I dismissed it from my mind, and when I saw her a week later, and in reply to her questioning, confessed that I had not done anything about it, she seemed greatly disappointed. Then I gave it serious consideration. For a stranger to take such an interest in my story was indeed extraordinary. So partially because of this, and in order to show her that I appreciated her interest, I agreed to act on her advice.

Accordingly, I went to the Ince Studio and succeeded in obtaining an interview with Sullivan. I told him I was not there of my own free will; that I had never taken the screen seriously, and had no copy of the story. You see, even though I had gone this far, I was still prejudiced. Sullivan was most courteous and gave me two hours of his time



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as he listened to my verbal synopsis. He said nothing during that length of time, and gave me no outward sign of what he thought of my story. I had decided, long before I completed the narrative, that we had both lost two valuable hours.

But imagine my surprise when he said, after a slight pause, when I had finished; "It's a great story! . . . Just the thing we've been looking for. . . . It'll make an excellent vehicle for Dorothy Dalton. . . . How much do you want for it?"

This was too much, even for an underfed writer to withstand all in one breath, and I was so excited that I requested a little more time in which to think it over. I left him, agreeing to phone him in a day or two.

I did phone him, as I had promised, and sold the story to Mr. Ince within a week. I stipulated that C. Gardner Sullivan must write the continuity, for I had long been an admirer of his work. This was agreed, and he made an excellent adaptation of the story. Mr. Ince personally supervised the production and gave it some beautiful settings; in fact, the

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"Ince standard," which always means the very highest of quality in pictures, was maintained throughout the entire production. Dorothy Dalton was very enthusiastic over the role of "Jeannette Bouchette," and gave one of the finest performances of her career. It was one of my favorite stories, and to this day it has remained my favorite picture because of its high-class presentation by a man who has the largest number of successes to his credit and who has consistently maintained a high standard of film productions. The picture was released under the title "Vive la France!"

That story changed the whole course of my career, and instead of turning my steps toward magazine writing, I decided to devote all my efforts to creating stories for the screen. It opened the way to greater things. Since then I've sold every story I've written, and I attribute it to Mary Pickford's decision to have a portrait of herself painted; secondly, to her having chosen Olga Printzlau to do the work, and thirdly, to my wife's persistent habit of gazing into shop windows.

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So it is probable that "America's Sweetheart" has never known until now how much her picture accomplished for one poor, struggling writer—for the story is told here for the first time.

I have told this story simply to encourage others who are trying to write for the screen. If God has given you the gift to create plots, all I can say is, "Keep at it." Let nothing detract you from your work. Stick to it until you reach the borders of purgatory, and then put on an asbestos suit and wade through the inferno. But never permit your courage and faith to weaken for a moment. That same rule can be applied to all walks of life. It is called "persistency." It eventually brings success. How often we hear the statement, "If I'd only stuck a little longer, I'd have made a fortune." It's the "sticking" quality that wins. The one who sticks is the one who succeeds, even though he has to crawl on his hands and knees. To finish—to be among those who endured—that is what counts.

## CHAPTER VII

### TITLES

Devote considerable thought to the main title of your story. Don't accept the first title that comes to you. It won't be the best title for your story. Spend as much time in the selection of your title as you spend on the story itself. Of course many times the producer changes titles, but when you send your story to him you have every reason to believe he will retain the original title. If it is really good, he will probably use it.

Often we find, upon completion of a story, that the working out of the plot has provided us with a better title than we had in the beginning. Perhaps this wouldn't occur to you. But think it over, before and after, and see if your title is a good one. Make certain that your title delivers the message. The title should attract attention, arouse interest and create desire. If it does this it is a drawing power for the box-office. In the majority of

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cases the title sells the story, both to the producer and the public. The title is the advertisement of the story and the producer depends on it to get the exhibitor to book it and the exhibitor depends on it to draw the patrons to his theatre.

In addition to this, be sure to keep the length of your title short. Use as few words as possible. Remember the average space reserved for the incandescent lights announcing the current production in front of a theatre will not accommodate more than a dozen letters. It peeves the exhibitor to have a long title, with four or five words, and he has to fret and fume as he ponders how he is to display the name of the production without eliminating some of the words. When he is compelled to reduce the number of words in the title it affects the neatness of the front of the theatre. But more important than all else, it registers a noticeable decrease in receipts.

The writer of photoplays must realize that the title is just as important as the story itself. Many stories have been sold to producers

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because the title had a "punch" in it. The title is the first thing the producer reads, and if it is a good snappy one, it doesn't require much effort to make him read the script. A good title will always arouse curiosity. Chester Bennett, an independent producer, told me he bought a story recently because of its title. The title was "Rock of Ages." That is a good title for a story. On the other hand, if the title is not a good one the interest of the producer fails to be stirred. Perhaps he decides that such a mediocre title will probably be followed by a mediocre story, and he will not even take the time to read it.

However, the judgment of the experienced screen writer and the producer are not always correct in the choosing of titles. Every season there are many good photoplays, with fine plots, portrayed by excellent actors, which fail to reap financial harvests predicted for them, because of poor titles. I will cite an experience of mine along this line.

When I sold "The Great Redeemer" to Maurice Tourneur I especially requested that he retain the original title. He was some-

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what opposed to it, and said he feared it was too religious and would keep a good many people away from the theatre. I disagreed with him, and much to his regret, he kept my title.

I happened to be in San Francisco when the picture was showing at the California Theatre, and I asked Eugene Roth, the managing director of the house, what sort of business he did with the picture. He shook his head as he informed me that receipts fell below the average that week. At the end of the run, he said, he called a meeting of his staff in his office and solicited their opinions as to what caused the slump. He had expected to do a big business with the picture, and he was at a loss to understand why he didn't. It played during a profitable season of the year; the weather was good, and the general comment of the audience as it passed out was that it was a fine picture. In view of these things, the concensus of opinion of his staff was that the title was against it. People paused in front of the theatre, looked at the title, "The Great Redeemer," and passed on down the

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street. It evidently was a religious picture. Therefore, they didn't want to see it. Manager Fred Miller, of the California Theatre in Los Angeles, told me he booked the picture for two weeks because he believed he would do a great business with it. Like Mr. Roth, he was disappointed, and his reason was the same. I then realized I had made a grave mistake in insisting that the original title be retained.

The title must have a pulling power. It is a fact that a good story with a poor title will deny the producer thousands of dollars which he is rightfully entitled to on the merits of his production. It is also true that an excellent title will very often put a poor picture over. Such titles as "Don't Change Your Wife," "Ladies Must Live," "Reported Missing" and "Passion" arouse the curiosity of those who attend picture theatres. They also attract the attention of the floating population, who wander aimlessly up and down the main thoroughfare of a city wondering where to seek amusement. If they pause before a theatre which illuminates a striking title they will undoubtedly want to see the picture.



## CHAPTER VIII

### PRESENTATION

Don't attempt to write continuity unless you know how. It is a separate work in itself and should not be written, or attempted, except by those who have made a study of it. Today every studio has a very efficient staff of continuity writers who are paid very good prices for putting stories into technical shape for the screen. They are writers who have made a study of this line of work and are experts in it.

Very few screen authors write the continuities for their stories. Very few of them like to do it because it is too mechanical. The majority of screen writers have found that in writing continuity they have not done their best work because it required too close attention to technical detail and thus interfered with the smoothness of the plot. In other words, there is so much mechanical labor connected with it that it prevents the writer from doing his best on his plot.

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However, it will do no harm for the writer who desires to devote his efforts to writing for the screen to take up a course in continuity. I believe that in two or three years from now the leading screen authors will be writing their own continuities. It must eventually come to that, for seldom is a continuity writer willing to follow the story as written originally. This is because no two writers would write the same story in the same way.

The continuity writer has his own ideas about the working out of a situation. In the past, he has been left alone to work out the plot as he saw fit and the result has often been disastrous and good stories have been mutilated and massacred beyond recognition. A great deal of this destruction has been eliminated by the author himself. For of late the screen author has kept a more watchful eye over his brain children and the producer is quite willing to have him chaperon his script through the various stages of growth until it reaches the screen.

In the next year or two, the audience is going to note quite frequently, "Produced

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under the personal supervision of the author." Today the producer is anxious and eager to consult and confer with the author of the story and get his ideas concerning certain effects and situations. The fact that he has been ignored in the past is due solely to the author himself. He has not been willing to realize the importance of the photoplay and the tremendous influence it has with all classes. He has persistently refused to take the screen seriously. I am referring now to the novelist and famous short story writers. The result has been that the screen has developed and introduced its own authors, and they are writers who are willing to devote all their time to writing photoplays and who realize it is a very serious profession, demanding serious work. Those who are willing to take the screen seriously are going to be the ones who will reap the big benefits.

To those who aspire to write exclusively for the screen, I cannot impress too much the importance of being sincere and earnest. Do not sit down and write the first idea

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that comes into your head and rush it to a producer. If you do, you'll get it back just as fast as the producer can get it to you. He gets hundreds of scripts written that way every week, and they are all returned to their respective authors. If you take your work as lightly as that, you mustn't be surprised when you get it back. You deserve to have it returned. The office of a producer is not a receptacle for slipshod scripts and slovenly-written plots. It's a high-class institution for the serious efforts of those who are sincere in their desire to contribute something really worth while to a great art.

Spend a month, if necessary, in mental construction of the story you intend writing. Be absolutely certain that you have given it the thorough and careful consideration it is entitled to, and then sit down and start putting it into shape.

Don't be satisfied with the first writing of it. Go over it with a critical eye and put yourself in the position of the purchaser. Study the action and go over each situation carefully with a view to seeing if you have gotten the

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most out of your story. If there's any doubt in your mind lay the script aside and ponder over it. Don't seek to interest the producer with a lot of pretty words and beautiful phrases which have no direct bearing on the action of your story. He cannot photograph a lot of nice words. He wants plot and action. Don't worry about the length of the story. If it is a good story it can't be too long; providing it is all good material and not a mere jungle of words.

Write your own subtitles. Make them as short as possible and only put them where they are actually needed and where they will clarify the action. Visualize each scene and describe it as you see it. Your description will receive serious consideration, for you are the creator of the scene and thus better qualified to explain it than anyone else.

"The Great Redemer" contained about thirty thousand words in the original script and "The New Moon" about forty thousand. In fact, most of my stories average that length. I spent six weeks in writing "The Great Redeemer," five weeks in completing

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"The New Moon," two months in writing  
"The Wonderful Chance," six weeks in writing  
"Fightin' Mad," two months was spent  
on "Thundering Silence" and four months on  
"The Siren of Seville."

It is not necessary to spend more than three hours each day in actual labor. If you work continuously on your story and complete it in two or three sittings it will not represent your best work. It couldn't be your best, for no writer completes a story in that length of time. Work on it when you feel inspired.

In "Fightin' Mad" you will note that the story begins with the first subtitle. Immediately there is action. It is action which is absolutely necessary to the progress of the plot. There are no superfluous scenes, no unnecessary action. Everything that is done has a direct bearing on what is to transpire later. There is heart interest in the affection of "Bud McGraw" and his three pals. In emphasizing the finer qualities of this modern D'Artagnan, we command for him the sympathy and respect of the audience. His desire for adventure appeals to the youthfulness

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which is in all of us. We introduce "Peggy Hughes" in order that we may have the element of love and romance; without which no story is complete. In order to test his affection for her, we place her in danger. Then we inject the great element of suspense, upon which the success or failure of a story usually depends. We take a mental inventory and find that we have a plot, romance, adventure and lively action. That is all any story needs, and if they are apportioned carefully, and lead up to a thrilling climax, our story will pass the most critical mind.

A leading producer informed me some time ago that he noticed a decided decrease in the number of scripts received from the public. He also stated that those received showed a marked improvement, indicating that more care and thought are being taken by aspirants. If those who are endeavoring to write for the screen would appreciate how much depends on the presentation of their story they would spend more time in its preparation. An inventor will spend a long time perfecting his invention before he is willing to apply for a



Eugene O'Brien and H. H. Van Loan Discussing "The Wonderful Chance"





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patent. He realizes there is no need for rushing it, and for each improvement he makes the greater will be his reward in the end. A writer is an inventor of plot and he depends on his ingenuity and creative ability to develop a story. The more time he spends on it the greater will be his chances of having it accepted. There's no need of rushing it.

There is one virtue which the average embryo writer doesn't seem to possess. It is patience. Fifty per cent of the scripts which are sent to the producers are accompanied by urgent requests that immediate action be taken and a decision rendered at once. Those who are attempting to write for the screen should understand the importance which goes with decision. The cost of producing the story may mean anywhere from thirty thousand to a half a million dollars. A fortune may be at stake. Perhaps the producer is going to put his last dollar in his next production. He must take time, in fairness to himself and to those who are manifesting their faith in his judgment by putting up the capital. To expect him to render a quick decision on a story

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which may mean an outlay of a hundred thousand or perhaps more, is not fair. Many producers work with very limited capital and are only financed for each production. The story must be fool-proof; it must have all the evidences of a box-office attraction—a picture that will make money. The producer may read the story and spend days reflecting over its possibilities of being a success. He may like certain things in it and decide he will hold it for a little while, and, if nothing better comes along, use it.

On the other hand, he may lack sufficient capital at the present moment, or perhaps he is waiting for the return of his investment on his last picture before beginning work on his next production. There are many elements which enter into the purchase of a story, and they are all foreign to those on the outside. Give a producer a reasonable length of time in which to make his decision.

Producers are as a rule charitable, kind-hearted and generous. But they cannot afford to purchase a script because it happens to have been written by "a poor widow, with

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six fatherless children to support," or a youth who is trying to "make enough money to pay his college tuition." A novelist wouldn't send such a letter to a book publisher and a playwright wouldn't repeat it to a stage producer.

Then why pour out a letter like that to a film producer? Producers cannot spend a hundred thousand dollars on the production of a story because the writer happens to be living in an alms house or is "trying to get enough money to pay for mother's operation," Such a condition should bring out the best that is in anyone. Few rich men write successful novels, books, plays or photoplays. But people have been known to become rich writing them.

## CHAPTER IX.

### ADAPTATIONS

In a recent issue of one of America's most popular periodicals there appeared an article on moving pictures which should interest every individual who is endeavoring to become a photodramatist. It said, in part:

"The next important evolution in the motion picture industry will be a marked advance in the quality of the stories filmed. Scenario writing is the most experimental and undeveloped end of the business. The picture producers are aware that an art which is a copy is never as good as a copy of Nature. For this reason they are looking forward to the day when original stories will be the thing."

That day has already arrived. The producer admits today that the original story is the thing. He will confess he has had his fill of adaptations of books and plays, which, in order to make screen material, have been

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distorted and twisted and turned until they could hardly be recognized. The producer will further admit that he has made these adaptations against his better judgment. The public demanded them. In the future, the majority of photoplays will be made from original scripts, written by photodramatists who know their screen and its technique.

When Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks returned from Europe, the Screen Writer's Guild gave a dinner in their honor one evening which was attended by nearly all the screen authors in Los Angeles and Hollywood. After the dinner was over, Mary made a very interesting talk. She announced that she was through with adaptations of books and plays, and that henceforth she wanted tailor-made stories, written especially for her by authors who know their screen.

This statement was a radical departure from her attitude in the past. For those who have been writing for the screen have always realized that she preferred books and plays which had been popularized before they were made into pictures. A year or two ago she

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would not have entertained an unpublished story, and screen authors knew better than to take their material to her for a reading. But at last she has seen the light, and realizes that the successful photoplays of the future will come from the pen of writers who are familiar with the screen and know how to write for it.

Nine of the biggest successes last year were original productions from original stories. The pictures grossed approximately \$500,000 and \$750,000 each. In the future the screen author will be supreme. At present producers are employing the best literary talent obtainable to write their stories. Some of these writers are being paid as much as \$75,000 a year. Isn't that goal worth striving for, dear reader? Producers are paying as high as \$10,000 for an original script today, and they are willing to pay even more in order to get what they want.

However, bear in mind that the writers who are receiving these big prices for their stories are the ones who spend care, thought and time in the development of their work.

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They realize that the screen is a wonderful medium of entertainment and instruction, and has 25,000,000 admirers who enjoy its comedies, dramas and tragedies, every week. These writers take their work seriously and they are entitled to the reward they receive. Some of them are going to be content to write not more than four or five stories a year in the future. If the producers pay such writers \$25,000 each for four or five stories, they will still be able to make a handsome profit on those stories, because they will be the best that the best screen authors will be able to write.

It is almost impossible to put a valuation on the work of an individual's brain. A story, providing it is good, is worth just as much as the writer thinks it is. It's worth more probably than he will ever get for it. If it is "just the sort of story that the screen needs" the producer will be quick to discover it.

Those who write their stories in long-hand must be satisfied with the reception those stories receive from the producer. Those who spend many real, serious hours each day over



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their work in their desire to turn out a story that will bring results, must not become discouraged if it is returned. The producer may have a very good reason for rejecting it. The producer may like the story very much, but because he hasn't a star to fit the role, he may say that it is lost because it would cost more money to produce than he is in a position to spend. A story may return it because it is not the particular type of story he likes to produce. Some producers like stories dealing with domestic problems; others like stories dealing with adventure; others there are who like nothing more than what is called "spectacular" without attaching to particular actor or actress who stars with big spectacles. If the producer is dissatisfied and easily discouraged, then it is better to put an end to his ambitions so far as the screen is concerned, and take up some other line of work.

To get anywhere, to be anything, requires a tenacity of purpose, a will that cannot be broken and a determination that refuses to be discouraged. If you really desire to be a successful cinematist, you will.



H. H. Van Loan and Norma Talmadge Discussing the Script of "The New Moon"



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Stick to it with a grim persistency, and though your script comes home a dozen times, send it out once more, and maybe the next time it will be accepted. The one who succeeds is the one who sticks to his task. You can't continually fail doing any one thing, unless there's something wrong with you.

I submitted the original script of "The Great Redeemer" to everyone in the industry before Maurice Tourneur finally accepted it. "The Virgin of Stamboul" I wrote especially for Norma Talmadge and finally sold it to the Universal for Priscilla Dean. "The New Moon" I wrote for Dorothy Dalton, and Norma Talmadge purchased it. "Bring Him In" I wrote for Lewis S. Stone, and Earle Williams bought it. "Fightin' Mad" was originally written for Jack Dempsey, and in the end it was enacted by a carefully selected cast including William Desmond, Virginia Brown Faire, William Lawrence, Rosemary Theby, Doris Pawn, Joseph Dowling and Emmett King.

I could go on reciting innumerable experiences to prove that when a story is com-

## ***"How I Did It"***

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pleted the author's work is only half done. It requires just as much patience in disposing of the script as it did in writing it. I wrote a detective story for Earle Williams once and it finally came out as a serial, called "The Third Eye," with Warner Oland and Eileen Percy. If I had become discouraged with the first few refusals of these stories, I would probably have every one of them now resting in the bottom of my trunk.

I believe the screen writer, especially the one who lives far from the studio centres, will find much encouragement in the attitude that has been assumed by James Young, the noted director, in searching for a screen adapter to build up Charles H. Hoyt's stage-play, "A Texas Steer," so that it will be thoroughly screenable.

This will be no easy task, for "A Texas Steer" is "talky" and lacking in love interest and other important essentials of real picture material. To quote Mr. Young's own estimate of the play, as it stands now it contains but twenty-five per cent of pictorial value.

## Adaptations

Mr. Young lives in Hollywood, where more than ninety per cent of the world's output of motion pictures is made. He could easily locate a score of competent adapters and continuity experts who would make his play into acceptable photodrama, or in this instance "photofarce," but he has taken a new angle on his ideas along this line.

Mr. Young visited the offices of the largest institution for the instruction of the technique of photoplay writing in the country and unfolded this story:

"I am the owner, with Sam Rork, the producer, of the screen rights of the late Charles A. Hoyt's 'A Texas Steer.' I will soon be ready to produce it as a motion picture, but like a great many stage plays it is far from containing adequate picture material. If you will put your student-body in competition with one another in an effort to give me a screen adaptation of this play, I will see that the successful adapter is paid well for his work. Mind you, I do not say that I will want an adaptation that will absolutely fill all my requirements, but will accept the best ef-

### ***"How I Did It"***

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fort turned in by one of your students, and pay him accordingly."

When it is considered that a great many of the students of the institution to which Mr. Young applied live all over the country, and that the great majority of them have never been even near a studio, it rather arouses one's curiosity to know just why Mr. Young passed up the Hollywood community of screen experts in favor of the fellow out in the sticks.

And here is the reason he himself gives:

"The student screen author who lives in the smaller communities has less means of diversion than those who are in the larger centres. The fellow from the small town, as it were, finds that moving pictures provide his principal form of entertainment, and he patronizes them quite liberally. Thus he becomes a close student of the picture. His critical and analytical powers are vastly improved and increased and he acquires a greater knowledge of story value. He does not necessarily have to complete his tuition in screen authorship in a studio, for the tech-



Eileen Percy Played the Feminine Lead in the Pathe Serial, "The Third Eye"





## *Adaptations*

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nique of the studio is quite mechanical, and can be, and actually is being reduced to form, so that it can be taught by correspondence."

For a director like James Young to take such a step as this should be considered as quite flattering to the writer or student-writer who lives away from the production centres, for Mr. Young's position in the screen world is a very notable one. It will be recalled that when George Arliss was to be presented in his first motion picture starring venture, James Young was chosen by the producers as the logical directorial genius to give the artistic guidance over the wide chasm between the stage and the screen to this most distinguished actor. Likewise when Richard Walton Tully, the noted stage producer, decided to turn his activities and those of his star, Guy Bates Post, toward the motion picture screen, James Young was promptly engaged to direct the first two of the Tully-Post productions, "The Masquerader" and "Omar the Tentmaker."

My admiration of his ability comes partly from a pleasant association with him in the

## ***"How I Did It"***

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production of several of my stories, including "The Highest Trump" and "A Rogue's Romance." In assisting him in the picturization of these stories I found him always considerate and most willing to accept my suggestions. The same cannot be said of many directors—especially in the past—who have been inclined to ignore assistance from the author and have preferred to give their interpretation of another's creation.

When I told Mr. Young that I intended writing a book for the purpose of aiding those who aspire to write for the screen, he was most enthusiastic and pointed out that while the majority of screen writers and adapters are located in Hollywood, yet it would be folly to assume that there are not equally as good writers in other localities. It would be unreasonable to suppose that all of the screen-writing talent is to be found in one definite center, he declared, for are not the great playwrights and authors of the country scattered throughout the various states?

## CHAPTER X.

### MARKETING THE STORY

“Where shall I send my story? How can I reach the producers or stars who buy the stories of free-lance writers?”

These questions are put to me probably more than any others concerning the writing and marketing of photoplays. I rarely try to answer either of these queries. But if you will absorb carefully the information I will give you here, I think you will be on a fair way to find the proper persons to consider the stories you desire to sell.

In the first place, more than ninety per cent of American picture production is in Los Angeles, and Hollywood, which is really a part of Los Angeles—its northerly suburb, so to speak. There is very little production in New York or Miami, Fla. Of course, small units are scattered about, but it is of the larger concerns that I will advise you now.

## ***"How I Did It"***

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I presume that when you write a story you have your idea as to whom it would suit—whether it be a star or balanced cast of featured players. If you live in a fairly small centre, your first source of information lies through your exhibitors, or theatre managers. If they are willing to help you, with a little patience you can get the information you desire.

Suppose you have written a story you think would be fine for House Peters, or Eugene O'Brien. There is no way of your finding out that House Peters is a "free-lance" player and does not star or have a company of his own. For this reason it would be of no use to send Mr. Peters your script. Eugene O'Brien's contract with Selznick Pictures recently expired and his future is not settled, as far as he is concerned. In the meantime he is not buying stories and no one is buying for him. Later, if you should see a paragraph in some paper stating that Eugene O'Brien has signed a starring contract with "Blank Productions," of Los Angeles, clip the announcement and file it away. Then, when you have a ve-

## *Marketing the Story*

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hicle that you think would be a good one for Mr. O'Brien, mail it to the "Scenario Editor, Blank Productions, Los Angeles, Cal."

Watch the papers. Get one that has a live moving picture page, even if from another city. If you are writing for the screen you must keep abreast of its innumerable twistings of stars and players.

All producers and distributors of motion pictures employ competent publicity staffs who supply all the papers of any size in this country full reports of their interesting doings. If your home town paper is lacking in proper screen news, tell its editor. If he has opposition papers he will listen to you. The film news pours in on him every week and costs him nothing.

You've just finished a story that should fit Ethel Clayton, we'll say for argument's sake. We all have associated Miss Clayton with Lasky's for years. But she recently finished her Lasky contract and signed with Robertson-Cole, in Hollywood. You probably have not heard of it yet, but if you read of her change, you should, on general principles, cut out this

### ***"How I Did It"***

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clipping and index it. You can get the address of any film star, producer or player, by writing to the fan magazines, but it is sometimes weeks before your answer is printed. Suppose you sent a story to Lasky's Hollywood Studio marked for Ethel Clayton. It is probable they would return the script with Miss Clayton's new address. But suppose they didn't. You get your story back and you are at sea as to where to locate Miss Clayton.

Go to one of your neighborhood moving picture theatres and ask the manager if he knows with what concern Ethel Clayton is now identified. Maybe he never played Paramount-Lasky pictures when Ethel Clayton was with Lasky, and maybe he is not booking Robertson-Cole pictures, which will include Ethel Clayton productions. But just the same that exhibitor reads a number of trade journals and is alive as to the star changes and movements. If he knows for a certainty that Ethel Clayton is with Robertson-Cole, you are on the right track; but if he is in doubt, ask him to get this information for you. He can find out from the exchange where he buys his

## *Marketing the Story*

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pictures, or from the road salesmen, if he is willing to go this far for you. There are exchanges, or branch salesrooms, of the big distributing corporations in many big centres. The exhibitors frequently go from their towns to these centres, or see the salesmen on tour. These exchanges are generally in one section of a town, and it is not a great deal of trouble for your theatre man to ask among the exchange managers the whereabouts of a certain star or producer.

A great many writers read in the papers that Norma Talmadge, Constance Talmadge, Nazimova, Jackie Coogan, Dorothy Phillips or Ruth Roland are at the United Studios, Hollywood. They send stories they believe suitable for these stars to United Studios, thinking that these United controls these companies. Either that or they send any sort of a story to United, believing that a big plant will buy stories of all kinds. This is a vital mistake. These are only commercial studios, making no pictures as an organization, but simply renting space and facilities to producers and stars. If the scripts are marked



### ***"How I Did It"***

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"for Constance Talmadge" or "Nazimova," they are turned over to these companies. But otherwise, United, with no scenario department, simply returns the stories to the senders with a slip saying it does not buy scripts.

In contrast to this situation at United, where the fifteen or so tenant companies buy their own stories, is the condition at Fox's, Lasky's, Universal, and others.

The Lasky-Paramount is a combination which makes and distributes its own pictures. Therefore, stories for Lasky's stars, or for balanced casts of Lasky stock players, are sent to the scenario editor of the Lasky Studios, in Hollywood. The same may be said of the Universal and William Fox and Goldwyn. Their studios and scenario departments are all on the West Coast—Lasky and Fox in Hollywood, Universal at Universal City, and Goldwyn and Ince at Culver City, Cal.

There is always a cry for stories for the screen, and many are never placed because the writer cannot find the producer and the producer cannot find the writer.

## *Marketing the Story*

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There are several agents in Los Angeles who do nothing but sell scripts on a commission basis, but they will not relish my printing their names, as for some reason or other they rely solely on known authors for stories to peddle to the producers.

The proposition of marketing your story will require much care on your part—for if you send it around indiscriminately, you will lose months, and get practically no results.

For example, suppose I am appointed scenario editor by Director Frank Lloyd, who directed Norma Talmadge in "The Eternal Flame" and Jackie Coogan in "Oliver Twist." The formation of Mr. Lloyd's production unit is announced in the papers. The deluge of scripts commences. The publicity has made it plain that Mr. Lloyd will not star or feature any player, but will make balanced-cast productions. Along comes a story from Wakoola, Alabama, or Fifth Avenue, New York City, about an individual who will be the outstanding personage of the production. A star-story that cannot be changed for balanced-cast purposes. I find that my script is unsuit-

## ***"How I Did It"***

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able for Mr. Lloyd, and back it goes with many others, with a printed slip. I would like to tell the writer, "This story might do for Miss Dupont, send it to Universal." But I can't. I haven't the time to do this, nor has any other scenario editor.

Let me advise you once more:

Read the papers. Carefully note star and producer changes. File and index their addresses. Know your story. Know fairly well whom it would suit, and then proceed.

As an example of just how far behind the times some writers are, stories are still being mailed to the Robert Brunton Studios, marked for "Bessie Barriscale" and "Frank Keenan." The Robert Brunton Studios are a year out of being (having become United Studios), Robert Brunton has quit production, and Bessie Barriscale and Frank Keenan are picture stars no longer. "J. Warren Kerrigan Company, Brunton Studios," is also the address on scripts still arriving from writers who do not know that J. Warren Kerrigan was off the screen for some time.

### *Marketing the Story*

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Think, before you mail your script. You certainly would not send Mary Pickford a story in which you would have her appear as a Spanish adventuress, and you would smile at the thought of trying to get Charlie Chaplin to become a virile cowpuncher of the plains for the purposes of your story. Very well—then set your mind the best you can as to just which star could do your story, or which producer might consider it as a balanced-cast picture.

## CHAPTER XI.

### HIGHLIGHTS OF PRODUCTION TECHNICALITIES

Although I have written hundreds of articles designed to assist the aspiring photodramatist, and to "polish off," so to speak, the writer who has already "arrived," I have never given out for publication any data or information concerning the production of motion pictures from the technical standpoint, for the reason that I considered I would be divulging some of the pet secrets of the business.

I feel now, however, that I should give the writer some of the highlights of production technicalities, for the reason that a better idea of just how far the technical experts of a studio can go in the making of a picture with unusual angles, should give the writer a broader view, and lessen a marked inclination of many photodramatists to fear submitting stories with supposedly difficult requirements.

### ***Highlights of Production Technicalities***

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It has been apparent to me for several years that many writers have become obsessed with the idea that stories they have completed in their minds, but have never put on paper, are too big to be produced. Without any knowledge of the great resources that are at the command of the up-to-date producer, they allow good plots to slumber, undeveloped and unrecorded, because they imagine the physical requirements of their scripts would take the producer and his players to remote corners of the earth, or put him to some outrageous expense because of some extraordinary locales that play an important part in the filming of the narrative.

To offset this very prevalent idea, let me touch lightly on the facilities the producer or director has at his finger tips that will make possible the filming of almost any conceivable type of screenable story.

All of the large studios are well-stocked with properties, furniture, tapestries, etc., and have on their stages and on the exterior acreages standing sets, both rain and fire-proof, of all the countries of the world. If there is

## ***"How I Did It"***

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anything wanted, it is built, accurately and in a hurry.

Every well-equipped studio has a location department, whose attaches are veritable walking atlases of the world, and in addition they have on file thousands of photographs, descriptions and accurate measurements of structures and localities of practically all the countries of the world. Lumber, beaver-board, plaster and paint will serve for the building of a replica of the Houses of Parliament, the Capitol at Washington, a street of India, or an igloo of the Far North.

The individual, or independent producer, who has only a small operating plant, can rent anything in the line of sets or furniture from the larger plants.

One large studio in Hollywood has eleven warehouses stocked with period, character and modern furniture, from the latest concert grand piano, to the Louis XVI bed, beautifully carved and with tapestried canopy. And then there are period and modern vehicles, from the coach of Napoleon and the old Russian droschky to the old New York high-back

### **Highlights of Production Technicalities**

taxicab of 1910, to the finest of "traps," and even locomotives, fire engines and aeroplanes. The tapestries and paintings of all ages are available. All of these things have been made in the studio mill, and by its craftsmen and artisans. They will reproduce anything that hands can make.

In this studio, a trip through the exterior acreage, where the permanent sets are erected, we find the tank, Mexican village, with three complete units; the old California or Mexican hacienda, with patio frontage; the Italian fishing village, Egyptian temple ruins, cave or mine entrance, New England and Southern streets, New York or London tenement district, Inca ruins, old New York trolley car and horse-drawn car, New York street of 1880, Western streets, New York dock-front street, railway and freight stations, street of India, London residence of 1850, old English castle, courtyard of a Hindu home, Brahmin temple ruins of India, Chinese street, large French chateau, early French houses and streets, rural homes, Indian clubhouse and a log cabin.



## ***"How I Did It"***

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Nothing in the line of sets, whether it be on the stage or in the open, is ever overbuilt. The construction is kept within the line of the camera, so that no labor or money is wasted.

As the skill of the studio artisan develops, trips on "location" are becoming less and less frequent. Journeys away from the studio cost a great deal of money, and in the majority of cases the producer can build or secure his "location" right in the studio.

By the trick of camera, lighting and construction, scenes of almost any country of the world can be made on the studio stage. Rain, ice and snow devices are a very important asset to production within the studio walls, as is the tank.

Rain is made by a system of overhead pipes and sprinklers; fallen snow is imitated with salt, and flying snow consists of powdered asbestos released from a wire-net turnstile, and is blown by the propeller of a wind-machine. This device will provide a light breeze or a furious gale.

On even the warmest day in Hollywood, while the sun is shining brightly, a log



During the Run of "Three Gold Coins," at the Strand Theatre in San Francisco, November, 1920, the Name of a Photodramatist was Featured for the First Time



### ***Highlights of Production Technicalities***

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cabin is covered with black canvas for night effect, and is lighted from within by the usual equipment. The villian drives the heroine out into a fearful blizzard. He opens the door of the cabin and we see snow piled about the door, ice laden trees are dimly outlined, and the snow and wind force the girl back into the hut. Another shot outside shows her enveloped by the storm, and the whole thing has all the earmarks of having been made in a Far Northern country.

The tank is used for marine scenes and what are known as "miniatures." The tank is simply a very large and bare concrete container, which will hold probably 450,000 gallons of water. On a few hours' notice it is filled and dressed to become a millionaire's swimming pool, a Dutch mill pond with mill-wheel and cottage, creeks, rivers, the turbulent ocean, the sewers of London or the lagoons of Venice.

In a corner of the tank is constructed the private landing of a yacht club, a rocky beach, on which a lifeless body is cast, or the wooded edge of a rural lake.



### ***Highlights of Production Technicalities***

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can be placed so that it will appear as if the entire vessel were broadside to the camera. In one of the best sea pictures ever made, the tank was used for the attack on a merchant vessel by a submarine, and the sinking of the "U" boat by the vessel's guns.

The little matter of putting a range of mountains directly at the background of a set when there is not even a hill within camera range gives absolutely no concern to the present-day producer.

Suppose he is making a "Western" melodrama and utilizes one of the typical wild-and-woolly streets in the studio acreage. He puts his camera in place, but finds that at the end of the street there are showing the minarets of a Persian palace that are part of an adjoining set. Does the producer set up a howl to the studio manager and demand to have the Persian settings pulled down? Not if he is fully abreast of the latest methods of making the moving picture camera a first class liar!

He has inspected this particular "Western" street previous to utilizing it. He has noted the Persian background to his mining town

### ***"How I Did It"***

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thoroughfare. A day or so ahead of time the technical department of the studio puts an artist to work painting the mountains that are required on a piece of glass about five feet by seven. The mountain range is painted in oils on the centre of the glass so that the painted area takes up about three or four feet by one foot.

When the artist has completed his work the camera is focused properly on the street, and the glass with its painted mountains is placed about six feet in front of the lens and arranged so that when the cameraman looks through his finder he can see a mountainous background in perfect position. When these "takes" are projected on the screen it is practically impossible for even a trained eye to discover the illusion.

The last time I saw them working the "glass" was at a studio where they were utilizing the tank as an outdoor swimming pool of a millionaire's home. The camera was shooting toward the house, which was indeed palatial, only it was but one story high, strangely enough. I was just wondering why the resi-

### ***Highlights of Production Technicalities***

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dential part of the estate was so "squatty" when I looked toward the camera again and saw our old friend the "glass," with the upper story of the home painted upon it.

This innocent device saves a lot of construction money and many trips to location.

It never helps the motion picture business any to tell its secrets to outsiders, but I am speaking of these few devices, the others being the tank and the rain, snow and wind machines, to make clear the fact that the studios will meet almost any requirements your story forces upon them. My publishers are not encouraging the curious to purchase this volume, so I feel I am not hurting the business any by telling the studio tricks.

A lot of airplane "stunt stuff" that looks on the screen as if it were made high in the air is photographed only a few feet above the ground or studio stage, in the latter instance in front of a painted "drop."

When Rudyard Kipling consented to have his "Without Benefit of Clergy" made into a motion picture, he wanted the producer to agree that the filming would take place in



### *"How I Did It"*

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Lahore, where the locale of the story is laid, and where he, Kipling, spent his boyhood. It was hard to convince Kipling that an exact reproduction of the environment of Lahore could be effected under the shadow of the Southern California mountains. But he was finally prevailed upon to loan the producer his personal photographs and sketches of Lahore.

When the picture was completed in Hollywood, and shown to Kipling in his English home, he declared that he might believe himself back in Lahore, so faithfully had the story been filmed. Dr. Horace R. M. Maddock, a former resident of India for forty years, and a friend of Kipling, was engaged in Hollywood as technical adviser for the picture. Later he was engaged for a Ruth Roland serial, which had an Indian locale, and for Norma Talmadge's "The Voice from the Minaret."

## CHAPTER XII.

### L'ENVOI

In the series of articles which compose this book, I have endeavored to cover every phase of photoplaywriting. I have tried to show those who aspire to write for the screen where the majority of ideas are gleaned; how to differentiate between the good and the bad; how to construct the story; the way to build up dramatic situations and startling climaxes; the time, care and thought necessary to bring about success to the aspirant; how to market the completed product; the prices being paid for good stories; the great demand that there is for tailor-made screen stories, and the real scarcity there is at the present time of good photoplays. In fact, I have attempted to give the reader the benefit of my experience. What I have written has not been overheard, or the results of what I have read. It has been a reproduction of my own personal experiences in writing for the screen.



- line of work. Creative ability is the fundamental basis of all writing, and unless you have it you cannot write. No one can give it to you; it has to be born in you; it comes into the world with you, and it goes out with you when you leave.

A couple of years ago there were about 20,000 amateur writers submitting stories to the various film companies of Los Angeles and New York. During the past year, less than 10,000 scripts were received by the producers of Los Angeles. The trouble at present is that not enough people are trying to write for the screen. Some have sent in stories, and because they happened to be rejected, these writers have grown discouraged and decided that they were not fitted for this work. There is a great famine right now for good screen stories, and those who are willing to take the screen seriously and refuse to allow themselves to become discouraged will reap the harvest.

I know of one firm that received only 3500 scripts from amateur writers last year. This firm is one of the largest in the industry.

## ***"How I Did It"***

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What has become of those who were trying to write photoplays? My only answer is that they must have grown discouraged.

About two years ago, I assisted in the preparation of a questionnaire for the Palmer Photoplay Corporation. This corporation is the only institution of its kind, as far as I have been able to learn, that enjoys the endorsement and support of the leading producers. Besides instructing in the art of screen writing, it produces motion pictures from stories written by the students whom it has trained, and was the first producing organization to pay royalties, or percentage of profits, to photoplaywrights. The Palmer questionnaire consists of a number of questions asked aspiring photodramatists, with a view to ascertaining whether they have creative ability. It is really a creative test, and the Palmer people refuse to enroll those who cannot answer the questions I prepared satisfactorily.

It might be of interest to the reader to know 50,000 applicants last year failed to pass this test. This will surprise a great many people

no doubt, and it is a remarkable evidence of the sincerity of that organization in its quest for new screen writing talent. Those 50,000 were all prospective students, and by rejecting them, the Palmer people sacrificed what would have been a huge financial gain. But they preferred to do this rather than accept tuitions from students they knew they could never develop into screen authors.

There are hundreds trying to write for the screen who have no creative ability, and there are thousands who have plenty of natural talent and this so-called creative ability, who are not making an effort to contribute to this great art. The latter are probably of the opinion that the office of the average producer is flooded daily with manuscripts. But that is the wrong conception. The trouble at present is that there are not enough people writing for the screen. The screen is in need of stories, better stories. There is a scarcity of good material and there will be just as long as those who are capable of writing good stories permit themselves to become discouraged because they do not sell their work

***“How I Did It”***

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to the first producer to whom they submit  
their product.

(The End.)

## THE VAN LOAN LETTER

Every time you attend a motion picture theatre, how would you like to have H. H. Van Loan beside you, so that at the end of the performance he could go over the production with you, giving you the high lights of the story, and a liberal discussion of its theme, plot construction, unities and sequences?

Or better still, wouldn't you like to receive an advance letter from Mr. Van Loan containing a constructive and critical analysis of the important photoplays of the day?

We can readily anticipate your answer, and believe you will receive with intense enthusiasm the announcement that for the first time in the history of the motion picture, a noted screen authority is to coach the aspiring photodramatist by means of criticism and comparison.

Just pause a moment—and think what this will mean to you! You will have as a basis for your study the actual motion pictures that come to your theatre from day to day! In advance of each picture Mr. Van Loan will send you his analytical review. You can peruse it before the picture is shown. Afterward, you will be enabled, with the aid of his guidance, to thoroughly analyze the various qualities of the picture—whether they be meritorious or faulty.

Perhaps, at this stage of your study of the technique of photoplay writing, you find yourself unable to properly dissect, so to speak, the various twistings and turnings of the screen stories of the day. You readily perceive the novelties or oddities in story construction, but find yourself unable to apply them toward helping you to write better stories.

"The Miracle Man," "Behind the Door," "Dr. Caligari's Cabinet," "The Golem" and "Blind Husbands" had unusual twists of story construction. The student of



screen writing who saw these pictures undoubtedly found much food for thought in every one of them. They represented radical departures in theme, unusual situations and startling climaxes. These were all typical screen stories and had all the elements necessary to make of them definite successes.

When you saw these great masterpieces, you would have profited much more from their unique construction had an authority of Mr. Van Loan's attainments provided you with a critical and constructive analysis of them.

The "Van Loan Letter" will soon be a reality. It will not only furnish you with an unprecedented means of study of the photoplay, but will also serve as a guide for the members of your family who are interested in the motion picture solely as a source of entertainment. It will advise them what pictures to see, and what pictures not to see. It will be issued monthly and will contain no motion picture advertising.

Mr. Van Loan's reviews of the current photoplays will be honest and unbiased. They will be compiled by a recognized authority whose long experience as a successful photodramatist and critic equips him to command the confidence of the aspiring screen writer and the theatre-going public alike.

The "Van Loan Letter" will be available through direct subscription only, and will not be sold on newsstands. We will be glad to inform you of the date of the first issue and the subscription rate, if you will send your name and address to "H. H. Van Loan, Incorporated, Security Building, Hollywood."



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